

THE  TIMES

MAGAZINE

MAGAZINE OF THE YEAR

11.06.22

THERE'S A LITTLE PLACE I KNOW...

Where the French,
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Portuguese and
Greeks go on
holiday

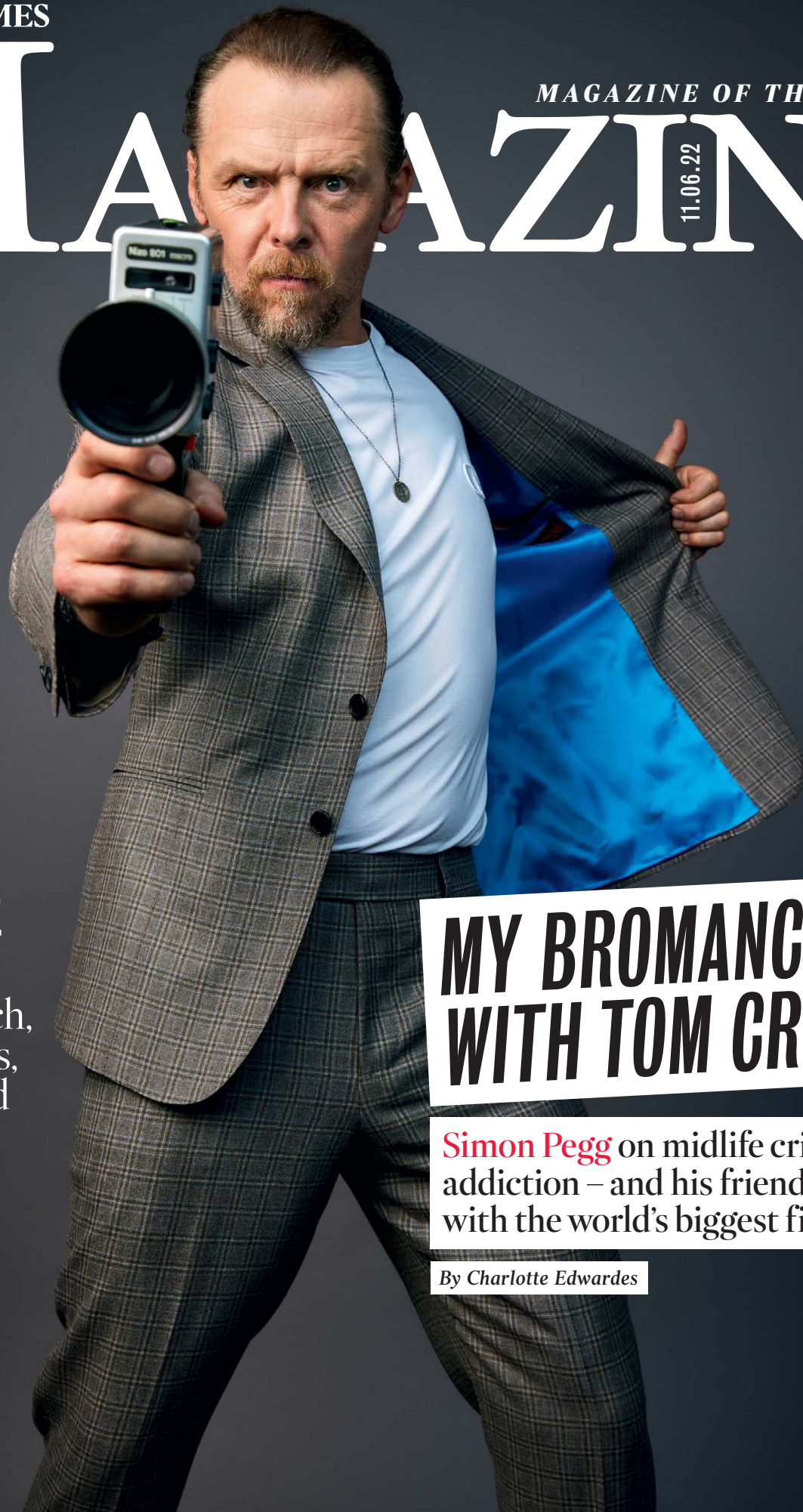
HOW TO TELL LIES IN 2022

It's easy – just
ask Boris

MY BROMANCE WITH TOM CRUISE

Simon Pegg on midlife crises,
addiction – and his friendship
with the world's biggest film star

By Charlotte Edwardes





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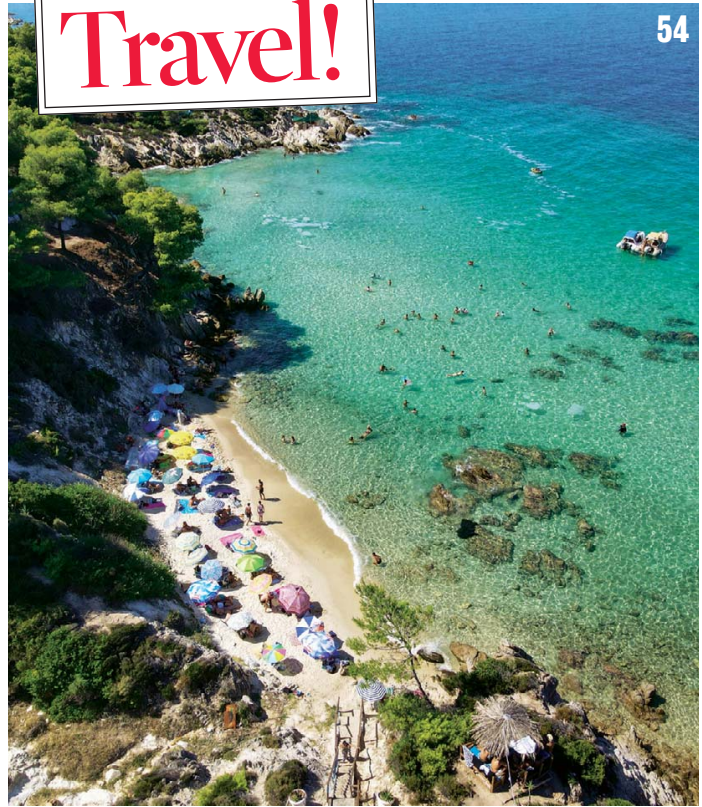
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CAITLIN MORAN

Why Abba Voyage made me cry with joy

It's the perfect pop experience – like a disco in heaven

As I'm sure you'll be aware – it's been big news – London has just seen the opening of *Abba Voyage*: a pioneering show that has brought holograms of Abba circa 1982 to the stage, playing all their hits. The real Abba – old, human and fallible – sit in their mansions in Sweden, counting their krona, while their uncanny ghosts, still looking young, perfect and sexy, entertain the tipsy masses in London, in a move that's both creepy and designed to earn as much money as possible. It's the most coldly calculating thing you've ever seen. It's the future.

Except, it's not. It is the future – that part is true – but everything else: oh, it's not cold, uncanny or bloodless at all. *Abba Voyage* is deeply human, unexpectedly emotional and very, very Swedish. For starters, instead of booking one of those huge, monolithic, borderline-inaccessible venues – the O2, Wembley; all turnstiles and escalators and endless queues – Abba have built, with their own money, what looks like a small, modern church of pop by the Olympic Park in east London. It's a building that works for *people*: vaulted wooden ceilings, perfect wheelchair access, gardens outside for drinking, smoking, eating and dancing. Abba know their audience: their audience, in their sequin jackets and disco shoes, will want *cocktails* and the bar has, accordingly, taps marked “Mojito”, “Aperol Spritz” and “Rum Punch”. Service is instant. No queue lasts more than two minutes. Ticket-holders are treated like people – not a vexatious, possibly mutinous herd.

And the show? I don't want to describe it in too much detail as I genuinely believe everyone should see it, and allow themselves to be both shocked and surprised. You should go firstly because it is just the most perfect pop experience. It is dazzlingly beautiful – the room explodes with stars, snow, seas, eclipses and rainbows. It is – as Shakespeare would have put it – an island full of noises, sounds and sweet airs: a club-hot live band give you a Dolby-sharp *Mamma Mia*, *SOS*, *Voulez-Vous* and *Dancing Queen*, like a discotheque in heaven. And my God, it's emotional. I thought I was coming for classy, camp fun. I did not expect to burst into tears, three songs in – only to look around and see that most



Three songs in and most of the audience were sobbing. Come in your sequins but take a handkerchief

of the audience were, similarly, sobbing. Come in your sequins but with a handkerchief in your pocket is the best advice I can give you.

You will cry because *Abba Voyage* is a genuinely new invention that will see your brain forming new synaptic networks even as you watch and sing along. This is a moment in technology as pivotal as recorded sound; or the first cinema tents, the footage of oncoming trains making audiences scream. For being able to see Abba – still young, in their glittery capes, with their slightly clunky dance moves and wry humour – on stage now, in 2022, means that we have found a way to take a memory and show it to everyone. It looks *real*. It is real, in any way that matters: your brain absolutely believes Abba are on stage in front of you – and yet you are watching something that, until last week, only existed in older people's recall, from years in which many of us were not even born. It kept reminding me of *Tom's Midnight Garden*, where every night, 11-year-old Tom wakes to find himself roaming around in the Edwardian dreams of the old woman who lives upstairs. The concreted garden bursts back into life with the previous century's trees; they skate on an iced-over river that long ago disappeared into underground tunnels; an unwrinkled Benny and Bjorn explain they have written a new song, *The Winner Takes It All*.

I'm so glad it was Abba – with their Swedish urge to make something with plywood and rainbows and humour and love – who were the first to pioneer this technology. They have now set the standard that will inevitably lead to us being able to see a hologram Beatles at Shea Stadium; a hologram Little Richard on the Chitlin' Circuit; a hologram teenage Kate Bush dancing in her bedroom.

Imagine if, say, the Michael Jackson estate had got there first. It would almost certainly have been a humourless, pompous, corporate rewriting of history. Instead, Abba have made their pop disco holograms sing *Waterloo* something that is, astonishingly, a modern spiritual experience. In this modest wooden pop church in east London, they've conjured something that is a practical immortality. Here, Abba have begun to live for ever. Historical events can be cut and pasted into the modern day. Memory has been democratised and is now shareable. You can be inside someone else's dreams of the 20th century. We have begun to be tourists of time. ■

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SPINAL COLUMN

MELANIE REID

For the first time since my accident my left thumb works. I can even scroll an iPad



A landmark arrived – the final assessments of the research trial. Like a student reaching her last exams, I felt demob happy. I drove into the city with a feeling of lightness, aware that a long but significant six months is coming to an end, that soon I would get my life back.

And getting it back enhanced in many subtle ways. As anyone with a chronic condition knows, miracles are for the fairies. In the real world, you hope for an easing of discomfort and a lessening of the struggle. Where I sit, small things, almost intangible, are in their own way a little bit life-changing. This is what the Onward spinal research, using ARC electrical stimulation to bridge the damage in tetraplegics' necks, has done for my body.

1. My hands look and feel different. After so many hours of nonstop fingers Pilates, half without the device, half with, they've improved a great deal. Give me another two years of training, I joked, they'd be cured. The fingers have unfurled and can work a bit in isolation. I can, for instance, murder a music keyboard by hitting the notes one at a time with different fingers, in quite rapid sequence. My right hand can laboriously twirl a pen.

2. My left thumb has woken up. Drumroll! It can reach across and touch the little finger. It bends slightly; it circles away from the

forefinger; it has enough reach to scroll an iPad. The next big challenge will be to make it control a computer mouse. When I began the trial, on my palm, where healthy people have a big pad of thumb muscle, I had nothing – now there's the beginnings of something.

3. I no longer have to wheel my chair in circles so my right arm and hand can do all the work of daily life. My left hand has regained some very feeble function. Six months ago it was effectively a frozen shovel; now I can pick up light things from the floor, or take a fork from the cutlery drawer, or pick an apple from the table. It takes far longer, yes, and requires serious concentration, but I must persevere, because the more I do, the better it will get.

4. An unintended side effect: I'm much slicker and more confident driving. An old hand loading myself, slotting in behind the wheel, my little checklists lodged subconsciously, and I drive much more smoothly, my hands softer on the accelerator, my reactions sharpened, my fear of commuter traffic banished. I am nearly as relaxed as in a past life.

5. I've made new friends, heard new points of view, experienced great kindness and care from the therapy staff, sharpened my brain, had some new ideas, felt my life broaden out again. Being out in the world, huge effort though it is, is good for you.

6. I do not wish to exaggerate. But I note other tiny improvements: in my sleeping, in temperature regulation, in less dramatic bouts of low blood pressure when I eat. I feel a small increase in sensation in my left fingertips;

I feel heat from the electric blanket on my feet.

In this week's final monthly assessments, done without stimulation, the improvements were visible in the results. I can pick up dice with my left forefinger and thumb, and turn a tiddlywink over and over with my right thumb and first two fingers. Things I couldn't do before. The number of seconds it takes me to pour water into a glass has reduced. By the roughest of guesses, I reckon an overall 20 per cent improvement. It may be more. It's been a long haul.

Two days after writing this, I will be going for an optional assessment, this time wearing the stimulator, to see what effect it has on my performance. From experience, I bet it's noticeable.

How to separate the benefits of the therapy from the stimulation is a complicated question. But plainly the indicators are positive, because Onward has just launched another experiment implanting the technology, rather than using it externally, into the necks and thoracic region of people with high-level spinal breaks.

Hope is unquenchable, that's the wonderful thing. Things point upwards. And I'm off to enjoy my sunlit uplands, which include the exquisite luxury of waking up knowing I don't have to drag my old carcass anywhere, and getting my eyes tested. ■

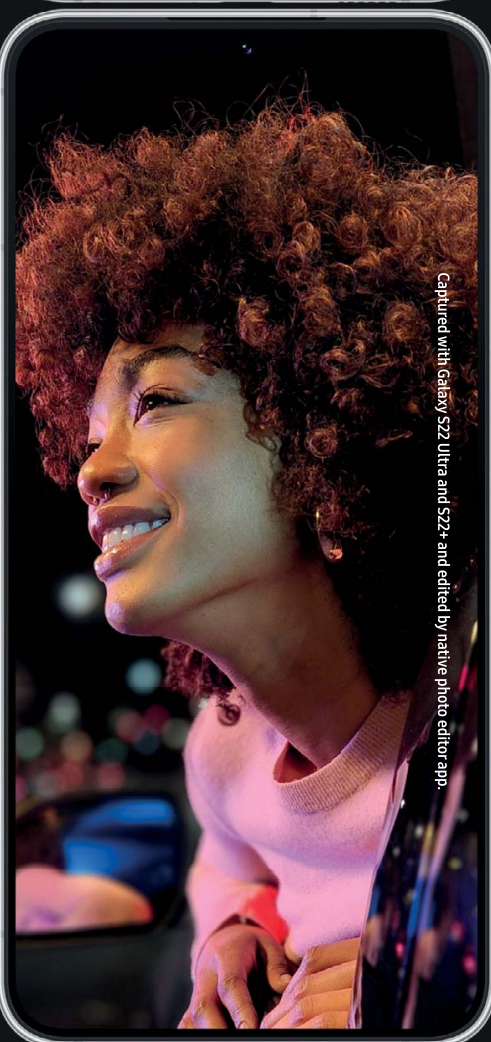
@Mel ReidTimes

Melanie Reid is tetraplegic after breaking her neck and back in a riding accident in April 2010

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Samsung S22 Plus 128GB	36 months	£30	£23.95	£861.92	£891.92	0%	0%	£891.92	£16	£16 + RPI announced in Feb 2023 = Price A	Price A + RPI announced in Feb 2024

*Each year your Airtime Plan will be increased by the Retail Price Index (RPI) rate of inflation announced in February plus 3.9%. If RPI is negative, we'll only apply the 3.9%. You'll see this increase on your April 2023 bill onwards. See o2.co.uk/prices. £23.95 Device Plan for 36 months and £16 monthly rolling Airtime Plan. £200 saving = £56 discount applied to Device Plan (total was £947.92 now £891.92) and £144 saving achieved by £4 monthly discount on 2GB, 5GB, 20GB, 30GB, 50GB, 75GB & 250GB Airtime Plans over 36 months. Ends 06 July 2022. 5G device, sim and tariff required to access 5G. See o2.co.uk/coveragechecker. O2 Refresh custom plans: Direct purchases only. There may be an upfront cost. 18+. Credit provided by Telefonica UK Ltd. Eligibility & Terms apply.

What I've learnt Trinny Woodall

Presenter Trinny Woodall, 58, grew up the youngest of six. She rose to fame with Susannah Constantine on the BBC makeover show What Not to Wear and founded her own beauty and skincare brand, Trinny London, in 2017. She has a daughter, Lyla, 18, from her first marriage, and lives in London with her boyfriend, the businessman Charles Saatchi.

Cancel culture is causing women in their fifties to lose their voice. Our children are telling us the language. I find it easier because I work with girls in their twenties and thirties, so I have more awareness. But older women are so scared to say the wrong thing, they don't say anything.

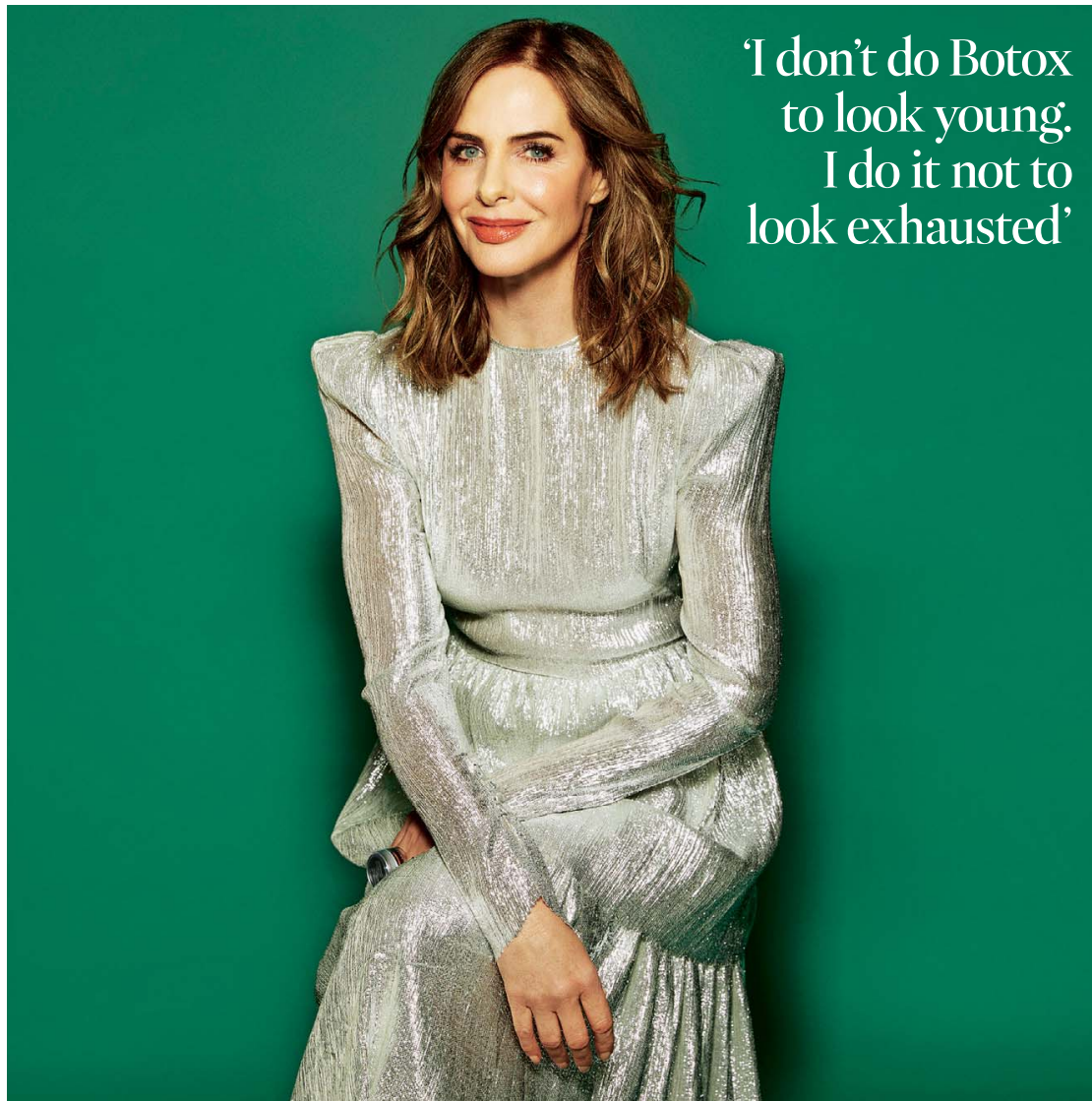
I don't do Botox to look young. I do it not to look tired. If I look in the mirror and feel awake and alert, I will be awake and alert. If I look exhausted, I feel it. I want to feel full of energy – that's all it is.

I've been hard up so many times. My dad lost all his money when I was 18, so I couldn't go to university. When I went into recovery [for cocaine and alcohol addiction] at 28, I started with no money again. After *What Not to Wear*, I was suddenly in a house with a mortgage I couldn't afford. I had to sell it to clear my debt.

People still assume Trinny London is funded by my boyfriend. The reality is that I have shed blood, sweat and tears on it during a very difficult time in my life. It used to upset me. You don't want anybody to make assumptions you know are incorrect. I used to fight them really hard. Now I think: that is your shit, not mine.

I've always wanted to be noticed. I am the youngest of six – I had to fight my corner. I can spot an only child because they never had to compete. They believe in themselves. My daughter, Lyla, is an only child, though she would say I've got two children – her and Trinny London. But she has unbelievable self-confidence. I think, where do you get that from?

I had nine rounds of IVF and two miscarriages before having Lyla. It was tough. Susannah was having baby after baby really easily and



INTERVIEW Hannah Rogers PORTRAIT Anna Martensson

I was losing them. The moment I let go of hope, I fell pregnant via intrauterine insemination. I didn't believe it. I was so paranoid, I went for a scan every single week.

When my ex-husband [Johnny Elichao] died, I had to become a mother and a father. I have to be both tough and empathetic. But it means Lyla and I are very close. It makes us resolve arguments. It means we have to be a bit more grown-up.

I became addicted to cocaine because I had a total lack of

confidence. I was very insecure and unappealing. I had bad acne. I finally stopped because I didn't recognise myself. I was so detached from life; I had no feelings. That is a scary thing. **I sold jewellery to pay for rehab.**

When I went the first time, my parents had sold a table to Sotheby's to fund it. It was always referred to as "the table we sold". I never wanted that situation again. I wanted to pay for it myself. **I had to learn to be good in the boardroom.** Whenever a man says

to me, "Oh, you're a CEO who actually runs the company?" I go, "Would you ever ask a man that?" Only 2 per cent of venture-capital money went to female-founded brands last year. It horrifies me. **I am more sensitive now than when we did What Not to Wear.** But that is the show television executives would want today. It was a great talking point and it delivered ratings. We had eight million viewers. ■

trinnylondon.com

HOW TO TELL LIES IN 2022

(Assuming you can get away with it)

Telling porkies has become acceptable in some circles – at least until the truth comes out. So here is your guide to the new rules about when to fib (and when not to). By Shane Watson

Of all the post-pandemic shifts, the big one may be our attitude to lying. Pre-pandemic we were pretty clear on the lying rules. Everyone accepted that there will be a few lies here and there – but we never condoned lying or liked being lied to, especially not by those in whom we placed our trust. And now there's a general feeling that this is a fairly regular occurrence. During a Q&A with Mumsnet last week, the first question put to Boris Johnson, one that summed up "the mood on Mumsnet", was, "Why should we believe anything you say when it's been proven you're a habitual liar?" Johnson didn't flinch, answered that he didn't agree with "the conclusion nor the premise of the question" and on the subject of integrity and trust signed off with, "But you've got to look at the record of what I deliver." Did he say, "How dare you call me a liar?" No, he did not. These days, he doesn't have to.

Lying has become an accepted fact of modern life, like NHS waiting lists. It's no longer surprising to discover someone has lied about something, whether it's not picking up their dog poo or fiddling their taxes. And now we're adjusting to another giant step into the new world of lies: being caught in a lie is not necessarily a humiliation, or even an embarrassment. In fact, providing you refuse to accept the lie as a lie, your truth might well prevail.

Trump has stuck to his truth (the election was rigged). So have Prince Andrew (he was not there and he did not sweat) and Boris (the parties were not condoned by him even if he was present).

Everywhere people are telling lies, big and small, so we are increasingly hazy as to what really counts as a lie, or rather which lies really count. Everyone on *The Apprentice*, for example, seems to fake their CVs and think nothing of it. These days their mentors expose their fabrications almost wearily and the contestants squirm a bit. They know that in the new real world lying on your CV comes under the category of smart move if you can get away with it.

We were already at the point where people feel entitled to choose what lies matter. Now a confident modern liar can persuade themselves that what they're doing serves a higher purpose: tell the school your child's work is all their own to get the results they need because "they're just not academic". Don't tell the government you didn't need your Covid grant, because you haven't done anything wrong apart from making a killing. It's really just a new way of looking at things, starting with what suits you best.

Possibly you are someone who never lies or maybe you think we live in times where some lies must be tolerated in order to avoid total meltdown. Either way, it pays to keep abreast of the new rules when it comes to not telling the truth, now more than ever – so here goes... ➡



WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE CAUGHT LYING

- Fight back is the new policy. Never admit that you're in the wrong, even if you are caught red-handed.
- Make "All guidance was followed completely" a mantra.
- Say sorry in an "It's not me, it's you" way. The tone should be, "You are very angry, so I'm sorry for that. Now move on."
- Use the bigger-issues-at-stake-here defence, eg "There's a war on. Hadn't you noticed?"
- Use the love excuse. (See Matt Hancock.)
- Aim to repeat: "I certainly broke no rules."

A PERFUME COMPOSED BY DOMINIQUE ROPION



PORTRAIT OF A LADY



EDITIONS DE PARFUMS
FREDERIC MALLE



Really irritating everyday lies: 'I'm not drinking this week'

POST-COVID LYING

Covid has become the excuse that keeps on giving. Of course, a lot of people wouldn't dream of falsely using the Covid excuse, but many people would. Pre-Covid, the last-minute cancellation was a social taboo. Now it's a shruggable offence. Here are the top Covid lies:

Still testing positive after ten days!
Jack has come back from uni with Covid, so...

We can't risk catching Covid – got John's parents coming to stay.

Think the dog's got Covid.

Can't catch Covid before my hip operation (in August).

She was definitely heading for a first, then she got Covid.

He didn't get the job because he was getting Covid.

Note: if the Whatsits are now not coming to your party because they've got Covid, there is still a chance they are telling the truth (but keep an eye on their Instagram).

SOME LIES WE ALL TELL OURSELVES

- I must have eaten something dodgy last night. (Or was it the third espresso martini?)
- I have a slow metabolism. (Or is it the buns?)
- I can't drink any wine over 12 per cent. (Or could you maybe drink less than a bottle?)
- He's a type A personality/alpha male, so that's why... (Or is he just maybe a bit of an arsehole?)
- I bought two pairs because they were in the one-day-only sale. (Were they?)
- It was mutual... We both got bored. (Hmm.)
- He's shy. (Or just rude?)
- She's tired. (Or just spoilt?)
- I can't remember where I got it. (The insanely expensive shop.)
- I've always wanted a green kitchen. (We saw the Whatsits and copied it, but now have forgotten that part.)
- I was at Knebworth. (I think. Feels like I was.)

NEW IN: SELF-CARE LIES

To be fair to us, there is a positive self-preservation element at work here. We're all more aware of our health, we have given ourselves permission to put ourselves first when necessary, and sometimes that means... lying.

- I think we're away. (Not sure, but can't face the drive.)

- I couldn't eat another thing. (Could, but not this.)
- We need to get back. I've got an early start. (Normal start – we've just run out of steam.)
- I might be working. (I need to see how I feel on the day.)
- We've got to get back to the dogs. (Can't face your beds.)
- Come to us, we insist. (Can't risk not getting fed until 10pm.)
- I can't eat garlic. (Can, but not in your mussels and mushroom soup.)

THINGS YOU'RE NOW EXPECTED TO LIE ABOUT

(No one respects you for it, but they won't stone you either)

Plastic surgery.

Botox (all injectables).

Hair dyeing (mainly men).

Hair transplants.

How much you drink.. (Doctors automatically double your estimate and then add a bit, so probably best to keep lying.)

How much you spent on the dress. (You say £185... True price, £350.)

How much assistance you get in the garden.

How much you are doing/have done for the Ukrainian effort.

Your age, precisely. (Especially women.)

The first record you bought. (Always supercool, never Neil Sedaka/Steps.)

THINGS YOU USED TO LIE ABOUT AND DON'T/CAN'T ANY MORE

How much your house sold for. (It's online.)

How much your shoes cost. (It's online.)

How much your sofa cost. (It's online.)

You're late because you got lost. (But you have Google Maps.)

Your age, if you're in the public eye. (It's on Wikipedia.)

You didn't see the message. (We can see you did, at 10am.)

Can't ring later, I won't have a signal. (Have you heard of WhatsApp?)

How much exercise you take. (They'll quiz you about your moves.)

I left it on the doorstep. (Not according to the door cam.)

THINGS WE WANT PEOPLE TO LIE ABOUT

How we behaved last night. (No, you were funny.)

The food. (Delicious, not dry at all.)

The speech. (No, you were funny.)

What we were like at school.

What we were like as a boss.

What we were like as a parent.

How much fun our partner's ex was.

How much fun our partner's first wedding was.

How great the place was that we recommended.

How long the dog has got.

OTHER STRATEGIES TO EMPLOY IF YOUR LIES ARE EXPOSED

Denial is popular ("It didn't happen") or failing that, reframing ("It's not what you think").

If you haven't got the nerve to take either of these lines, you might want to try one of the following acceptable options:

- Use the health excuse. (I may have addiction issues.)
- Use the greater good excuse. (Dominic Cummings heading to Barnard Castle.)
- Use the "I was just joking" excuse. (Rebekah Vardy when rumbled for having asked her agent to leak a story.)
- Use the "misremembered" excuse (see Meghan Markle misremembering having briefed the authors of the biography she claimed not to have co-operated with).
- Use the actual memory loss excuse.
- Blame the prescription meds.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU CATCH SOMEONE LYING

Say, "Recollections may differ."

Change the locks.

REALLY IRRITATING EVERYDAY LIES

Oh, this? Can't remember where I got it. (Yes, you can. It was Zara last week.)

We tried to deliver your package but you were out. (Not standing at the door, you mean.)

I think we might be going into a tunnel.

I'm not drinking this week.

I don't remember saying that.

THE LIES THAT PUT US ON THE PATH TO WHERE WE ARE NOW (SOME OF THEM)

"There was no impropriety whatsoever in my acquaintanceship with Miss Keeler." (*John Profumo*)

"There will be no whitewash at the White House." (*Richard Nixon*)

"I did not have sexual relations with that woman." (*Bill Clinton during Lewinskygate*)

"The big lie." (*Donald Trump's claim that a conspiracy robbed him of a second term*)

"All guidance was followed completely in No 10." (*Boris Johnson*) ■



Simon Pegg says alcohol addiction almost killed him 12 years ago. Now the 52-year-old is one of Britain's busiest actors – and best mates with the world's biggest film star, Tom Cruise. Interview by Charlotte Edwardes

PORTRAIT Robert Wilson **STYLING** Hannah Rogers



**‘WHENEVER TOM
TEXTS ME, I’LL GO,
“WHOOO-OOH!”
TO MY WIFE’**



Simon Pegg, 52, wears suit, Paul Smith;
T-shirt, Dior; shoes, Harrys of London.
Opposite: with Tom Cruise in 2018

n one of Simon Pegg's recurring dreams he finds himself back at school in Gloucester. He is as he is today – 52 years old, buff, bearded, tattooed, maybe even in these same track pants from Fred Segal he's got on here in the make-up chair for our photo shoot.

His school friends are as they were in the early Eighties. The era is flip-top desks, LCD watches, that trick of bursting ink cartridges in your mouth. Pegg is explaining how epic his life is now, how being a geek became his salvation. Remember how mad-obsessed he was with zombies and aliens and *Starsky & Hutch*? Well, he made films about zombies (*Shaun of the Dead*, 2004) and aliens (*Paul*, 2011) and cops (*Hot Fuzz*, 2007), and they made him famous.

And he has an ongoing starring role in *Mission: Impossible* with Tom Cruise – TOM CRUISE – who texts him things such as, “Hey man, looking forward to seeing you,” with the fist bump emoji. And he's been in *Star Wars* (*The Force Awakens*, 2015), in a big rubber alien costume. And he met Carrie Fisher, whose image torn from the profile page of a magazine he treasured as a child (worn away in the area of her mouth where he always kissed her goodnight, although he doesn't do that any more) and he actually spoke to her. More than once.

“It's a really odd dream about the desire to prove myself, like wanting to go back and show them.” He chuckles at this boyish world view. So, that's the nice dream, the one that's “pretty easy to analyse”.

But there's another one. This one is dark and his voice drops. “I'm in a room in my house, which I didn't know existed, like there's a door or hole in the wall to a whole other part of the house that is fully furnished, but there's an evil presence in there. It is tangible. You can feel it in the air. It's like static. And it's really scary. That's my nightmare.”

There is a pause, which he does not fill with self-effacing humour as he usually does after revealing something personal. He just leaves it there, hanging, while the make-up artist moves quietly around him, separating strands of his hair with a comb and spraying little puffs of thickening powder. So I say the only thing I can think to say, which is, “Right, OK. And are you still going to therapy?” I assume we are thinking the same: that this nightmare relates to his recovery from alcoholism.

Fans of Pegg will recognise this slicing between the absurdly funny and something more unsettling. It's what he does over and over in his films. Even his autobiography, *Nerd Do Well* (2009), is split. One narrative is a mad fantasy where he is a billionaire superhero with biceps who has won the heart of the French exchange student he obsessed over,

aged 13. “It's completely unfiltered, what my raw machismo would want.” The other is straight real life in which he witnesses said French exchange student snogging his best friend and is crushed.

He turns the ordinary into the extraordinary, geeks into superheroes. Childhood has been a goldmine. His work is a cathedral to his obsessions, influences, fantasies, worst and best moments, with recurring themes such as the deep bond of male best-friendship and the terrible relationship he had with his stepdad.

“Write from the truth is always my mantra,” he says. “Even a grain of truth and something will feel more authentic.” Indeed. If you want to understand Pegg as an agonised adolescent, it's all there in the Cornetto trilogy (*Shaun of the Dead*, *Hot Fuzz* and *World's End*), his collaborations with his co-star and best friend, Nick Frost, and the writer/director Edgar Wright.

On the surface, his career trajectory has been awesome. On Wikipedia his filmography credits have their own page, among them: *Spaced* (1999–2001), *Brass Eye* (2001), *How to Lose Friends & Alienate People* (2008), *Star Trek* (2009 – he played Scotty), *Lost Transmissions* (2019), *Inheritance* (2020), plus a load of voiceovers, including *Ice Age* and *The Adventures of Tintin* (he and Frost play the Thompson twins). A Channel 4 six-part drama, *The Undeclared War*, starts soon and he's midway through an indie film with Minnie Driver called *Nandor Fodor and the Talking Mongoose*, as well as the eighth *Mission: Impossible*.

Pegg really likes Tom Cruise, really likes him as a person. Their shtick is that Pegg is an ordinary guy and Cruise a big Hollywood idol, which, like all good jokes, is rooted in truth. Pegg can get away with being anonymous if he pulls his cap down, whereas Cruise is so off-the-charts famous it's hard to fathom. One time, they went into the Vienna subway on a tech recce and within a couple of minutes they were surrounded. Hundreds of people with their phones up – Tom! Tom! Tom! “But he loves it. I mean, I would f***ing hate that.”

Another time, in Casablanca, Pegg was in Cruise's car. “We were surrounded by a f***ing throng of these young Moroccan guys going, ‘Tom Cruise, Tom Cruise, Tom Cruise,’ and banging on the car. And I'm looking at Tom and he was f***ing laughing his head off. I'd be so stressed out, but he's very OK with it. He understands that's the price for the level of movie star he is. He's perhaps the only movie star left. Everyone else who comes near has probably done TV. I can guarantee you will never see Tom Cruise on a TV show. Because he's about movies. Movies are his passion.”

Are they friends? “Yeah,” he says. “We text. Whenever he texts me, I'll go, ‘Who-ooh!’

Doing a press conference with Tom Cruise, Beijing, 2018



‘I KNEW I WAS DEPRESSED. I JUST DIDN'T KNOW A WAY TO ESCAPE IT. DRINKING NUMBED THE FEELINGS’



Backstage at the O2, London, with Chris Martin from Coldplay, 2008

With his wife, Maureen McCann, 2012



to my wife.” He mimes waving the phone at his wife, Maureen, but she just eyerolls and calls him “your boyfriend”. Pegg has known Cruise for 16 years now and they’ve had deep conversations and heart-to-hearts. “The best thing he taught me is never to accept responsibility for a mistake,” he says. “But in a funny way. Like if something goes wrong and it’s his fault, he’ll flatly deny it. And then if someone corrects him, instead of saying sorry, he’ll just say, ‘Yeah,’ and wink at me. I admitted f***ing up once and he said – with a wry smile, I hasten to add – ‘Simon, don’t do that.’ He maintains his authority by never being to blame for anything.”

I am meeting Pegg to discuss *The Undeclared War*, in which he stars (alongside Mark Rylance, Adrian Lester and Alex Jennings) as Danny, head of operations at GCHQ. It’s another role with nerds, this time cybernerds. “Same beliefs, different tribe,” as he puts it. The premise is that it’s April 2024 and Boris Johnson has been out of government for 15 months – which is still feasible, I say, and Pegg nods vigorously and crosses his fingers – having been ousted by an ambitious ministerial colleague, who is Eton-educated and black. As the country faces a general election, Russian hackers have launched a cyber attack on our infrastructure systems. The future of British democracy is thus in the hands of computer geeks in plaid shirts who have trouble making eye contact and whose pens are ordered using the colour spectrum (no pink, because pink is just “absent green”, explains one).

Among them is intern Saara Parvan, played by Hannah Khalique-Brown, who looks like a young Amal Clooney and is brilliant as far as I can tell from episode one. There’s a moody Hollywoodised GCHQ and glass and concrete bunker version of the Cobra meeting room, which, guaranteed, is several thousand times sexier than the actual Cobra meeting room. Pegg as Danny is sombre. His hair is pasted against the side of his head as if he’s either just come out of the shower or not had time to go in for a while, and he spends a lot of time stress-squinting into late-night video calls with the home secretary.

No one has suggested this part is comic, but Pegg seems to want to pre-empt any confusion. “One thing,” he says uncrossing his legs. “It’s frustrating when you’ve become known for comedy and do a serious dramatic role like *Undeclared War* and people are like, ‘Oh no, don’t do that.’ I’m not a comedian. I was a comedian 25 years ago. I’m an actor who happens to have done comedy. It’s like coming out to your conservative parents as bisexual and they’re like, ‘Oh no, just do the thing that we like you doing. Don’t do the other thing.’ I hope with this people will accept me as not being funny.”

The trouble is that Pegg is funny – not in that role, perhaps, but here now. For instance, there is a halt to the energetic photoshoot because someone notices his flies are wide open for a whole series of frames. This happens again, not with the flies this time, but because the camera, which usually autofocuses on the eyes for that striking visual impact, keeps focusing on his nipple. And the anecdotes he tells leave me helpless. Like the time he met Carrie Fisher at Comic Con in 2004 and he told all about kissing her photo and she looked at him dead on and said, “Do you feel better for telling me that?” Or the time when they were filming *Star Wars* and went for a walk around the set arm in arm and he stopped, faced her, looked deep into her eyes and said, “You know I love you, right?” And she grabbed his hand, looked at his wedding ring and said, “F*** you.”

Even his proposal to his wife sounds like a sketch. He bought the ring, organised a trip to watch the sunrise on the island of Cephalonia and then pretended to be grumpy, as if he didn’t want to be there. “We watched the sun come up and I was a real pain, like, ‘Can we go now?’ So she traipsed off back up the beach and I got the ring out and got down on one knee and called her. And she turned around and saw me and said, ‘You c***!’” He cackles at the memory. “I told that story at the wedding.” So yes, he enjoys being funny. “Whether that’s to do with wanting to be constantly validated by other people’s laughter, I don’t know.” He remembers constructing jokes in childhood to make his mum laugh.

Simon: Nathaniel’s dad is a dentist.

Simon’s mum: Where does he practise?

Simon: He doesn’t. He’s a real one.

As he grew older, he saw comic potential everywhere. Working in the holidays as a lifeguard, he noticed the poolside warning sign that reminded the public the baths were not a toilet. “Welcome to our ‘OOL. Notice there’s no ‘P’ in it? Let’s keep it that way.” His immediate thought was that they had missed a trick by not going one step further: “Welcome to our ‘L.”

For most of this morning, his baseline mood is amused. Amused, open and “way more laid-back than I used to be”. He didn’t always enjoy talking to journalists. For years he saw their questions as not just nosey, but micro-aggressive. If they asked about his home life, he’d think, “What’s that got to do with you?” He’d be super-defensive if they said his looks weren’t typically Hollywood, like he was some unattractive loser, or if they talked about him being boy-next-door ordinary, even though that is the beauty of his art. The truth was that he was engulfed in self-loathing and hiding a mental health crisis.

“I knew I was depressed. I just didn’t know how to escape it.” So he drank. And the

With Nick Frost in *Hot Fuzz*, 2007



With Jessica Hynes (front) and the cast of *Spaced*





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alcohol numbed the intolerable feelings. “I became addicted to the sensation of being numb, rather than the chemical addiction.”

I ask if he drank at breakfast. “Sometimes. In the worst times,” but he doesn’t want to pursue that thought. “I look back now and it makes me feel sick.” It wasn’t that no one noticed. Nick Frost was concerned. Maureen asked cautiously that he, you know, perhaps stop drinking. “But then it’s not as easy as stopping,” he says. “And it was difficult to admit that. So I just sort of threw myself off a cliff. And I hit the ground hard at high speed.”

The denouement was four lost days after Comic Con in San Diego, 2010. I ask if he can remember anything at all. He remembers sitting on the pavement eating pizza, having lost his phone, and thinking, “Shit. I must look really pathetic.” And he remembers flying back to Los Angeles on a private jet. Sigourney Weaver was on board. He’s clear about that because Weaver was pretending to be cabin crew, walking the length of the plane serving peanuts. Next, he was in a hotel in Santa Monica. “I think I was just in my room. But after I got back to LA, I don’t really recall much at all.”

If he hadn’t stopped at that point, he’d be dead today. “One hundred per cent, because, and I don’t think it’s too dramatic to say, that is the ultimate end of that line of flight.” He surrendered to treatment at the Priory to get clean. “Although I started smoking a little bit in there. I remember asking one of the therapists, ‘This is an addiction clinic. Why do you let people smoke?’ And he said, ‘Because no f***er would come in here if we didn’t.’”

Today he is health obsessed. He exercises six days a week (Monday, strength; Tuesday, core; Wednesday, active recovery; Thursday, strength; Friday, strength; Sunday, boxing). He joked during lockdown that he had perfected the kimchi pancake and an indulgence is fresh peeled mango. He’s sure he hasn’t replaced one obsession with another because he knows his limits. “I’m not in the gym for three hours.”

That said, his weakness now is tattoos. He takes me on a tour of them, pointing to each one and explaining its provenance. There’s one from *Raising Arizona*, the Coen Brothers film, and a few relating to Japanese manga and anime. There’s *Jason and the Argonauts*. “They’re like Twiglets,” he says, meaning you can’t stop having them.

Oddly, he thinks the catalyst for his extreme alcohol bender was the writing of his autobiography. He opened a ziplock file in his mind about childhood and found much that was painful and unresolved there, not least about his parents’ divorce and the role of step-parents. “My relationship with both [stepfather and stepmother] was really difficult. They were young and immature. They had their own issues. And I was the walking, talking



‘I WANT TO WORK UNTIL I DROP BUT WORRY I DON’T HAVE TIME TO DO IT ALL. IS THAT A MIDLIFE CRISIS?’

remnant of another relationship. For a child it is extremely disturbing to be rejected by an adult. Adults are the authority on everything. When there’s suddenly an adult in a position of parental power who doesn’t like you, it’s like, what the f***?”

He remembers his stepfather as petty and needling, how he’d say (he puts on a voice), “What’s this rubbish?” when Pegg was watching TV and similar “bullshit echoing phrases”. One time, Pegg was sweeping the front step without sufficient zeal and his stepfather “cornered me in the garage with a two-by-four [block of wood]”. He gave Shaun’s character a similar set-up, but “weirdly the stuff in *Shaun of the Dead* was a combination of a fantasised version and the real version. I never got that confession and apology from my stepdad that Philip gives Shaun because mine was just being a dick.”

He adds quickly that his stepfather is still alive and they get on fine now, and that “the rest of my childhood I look back on as being sunny and full of *Star Wars* and things. Ha, ha, ha.” All over his Instagram (he loves Instagram) are photos of him as a child on beaches in Devon, blond, grinning with a pudding bowl haircut, Hulk T-shirt and those red plimsolls with the elasticated tongue, next to photos of his daughter, Tilly, 12, the super-smart apple of his eye, and two schnauzers, Willow and Myrtle.

Family life is mercifully humdrum. They live in the Hertfordshire countryside. He does the school run, picks up dog poo, watches films with Tilly at the weekend and they trade music tastes. He and Chris Martin (of Coldplay) are godparents to each other’s children (which means he is the godfather to Apple, Gwyneth Paltrow’s daughter), but he suspects Martin is more successful at it. He came back from a dog walk the other day to

find his daughter electrified because Martin had facetimes her from the studio where he was working with her favourite band, BTS.

We sit down so he can eat his lunch, a tidy salad of prawns, lettuce and potatoes, and he riffs on theories. Humans cannot not have mental health issues, he says, because we can’t cope with the speed of today’s world.

“Freud said he started doing psychotherapy because life was so fast, and that was in the 18-whatevers. Imagine what he’d think now. The human brain is still the caveman brain. It still thinks that lightbulbs are the sun, that we shouldn’t travel faster than ten miles an hour. Our frontal lobes are in constant battle with our amygdala, and that schism just causes no end of problems. Anything like obesity or sexual addiction, these are all biological imperatives that have been hacked by the modern age. Suddenly, we don’t have to hunt any more. There’s Tesco. But we keep eating because part of our brain thinks we might not eat tomorrow. So there’s a strange war going on between our modern brain, which has developed at a rate that’s faster than evolution. We’re an aberration,” he concludes. “We don’t make sense. We’re the only animal on the planet that doesn’t work with the ecological equilibrium. I think we might be a mistake.”

Maureen thinks he reads the internet too much, but at least he doesn’t worry about what people say about him any more. This is something he tells Chris Martin. “Stop reading comments about yourself on the internet! Chris is very self-deprecating. It’s incredibly charming but, you know, be more Tom Cruise and ignore it.”

I ask him what keeps him awake at night. He says the government, Ukraine, the environment. And lately he has been worrying about death. He still has too much to do, he says. He’d like to make another film with Edgar Wright. He has an ambition to direct and there’s the eight-part TV series based on *The Technicolour Time Machine*, a 1967 sci-fi novel by Harry Harrison, which he’s writing with Crispian Mills.

“I’m 52 and I want to keep working until I drop, but for all the things I want to do, I don’t have enough time. How many more times am I going to go snowboarding?” He loves snowboarding. There’s a photograph mid joyous leap with a selfie stick on Instagram, white mountains, gas-blue sky. “What’s the point if I can’t bend down to do up my boots? I’m always thinking a couple of years ahead because that’s how far my work stacks up, but I don’t have enough time.” He takes another forkful of salad. “Is this a midlife crisis – thinking, ‘Shit, I’m halfway there?’” ■

The Undeclared War is coming soon to Channel 4 and All 4



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A full-page photograph of two women, Hannah Evans and another woman, using TRX suspension training equipment in a gym. They are both wearing white tank tops and black leggings. The woman on the left is in a squatting position, while the woman on the right is standing. The background is a white wall with a purple and orange horizontal stripe. The floor is black.

Hannah Evans, 28, at F45 Soho gym,
photographed by Grey Hutton

For many millennials, going to the gym isn't just about abs and glutes. Hannah Evans, left, explains why she spends a quarter of her salary on working out



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My name is Hannah Evans and I am addicted to the gym. Yes, there might be worse vices, but this is the world of fitness with a capital F – and a hefty price tag: glitzy members-only gyms that cost many hundreds of pounds a month; pay (a lot)-as-you-go high-

intensity interval training (HIIT) classes with disco lights and banging music at £25 a single session; luxury activewear brands with clothing that is “sweat licking” and “waist cinching”; complicated gadgets that track heart rate, sleep, recovery and a dozen other measureables that I don’t quite understand. But I buy into it all. Anything that promises to make me a better, fitter, more optimised version of myself I will fly to like a Lycra-clad, dumbbell-wielding moth to a flame.

And I’m not alone. Millennials (the demographic aged 25 to 40) are the biggest spenders on fitness, splashing out on average £365 a month on gyms, supplements, subscriptions and health gadgets – nearly five times more than those aged over 55. Women account for more than half of gym memberships in the country and 76 per cent of group fitness class attendees. And women like me, in their mid to late twenties and living in cities (I’m 28 and live in London), are the biggest investors of all. Thanks to us and, no doubt, the pandemic, which fuelled a lucrative spin-off market of home workouts and virtual classes, the fitness industry in the UK is now worth £1.8 billion.

Granted, there was news from the business pages last month that the health and fitness sector had slightly declined recently, falling back to its pre-pandemic size. But, according to the annual State of the Fitness Sector Report, most of the closures have been in the “squeezed middle” of the market and certainly not among the luxury lifestyle spaces my friends and I frequent.

If I sit down and tot up how much money I spend a month on fitness – something I try to avoid doing – it’s clear that I’m making a pretty sizeable contribution to that industry.

There’s my gym membership: £190 a month. That might sound extortionate, but there’s a pool and the towels are really big and soft, so I’ve justified it. I go spinning with a friend at her gym, which costs £22 a class. At both of our gyms there are also delicious shakes you can order for afterwards that cost a not insubstantial £7 (almond butter doesn’t come cheap, you know).

I’ve recently got into long-distance running, which, in theory, should be free, but somehow that’s ended up being expensive too. The latest It trainers cost roughly £200, but you also need an everyday pair for casual runs and another for races. And if you listen to the



I easily spend 25 per cent of my monthly income on my fitness addiction and all the kit and supplements



Top to bottom: Hannah Evans enjoying the facilities at the Body Lab, an exclusive gym in west London

experts, each pair has about only 200 “good” kilometres in them, so they need to be replaced every few months.

Let’s not forget the apps. I have a premium subscription for Strava (£6.99 a month), which logs my running routes, and MyFitnessPal (£7.99), which counts my calories. There’s also Whoop, which comes with a wrist strap that tracks your heart rate and measures recovery (£30 a month). Then there are the supplements. The protein I put in my porridge (£21.99 a month), the CBD oil that promises to help boost my “brain power” (£80 per 30ml bottle) and balm that soothes sore muscles (£43 for 50ml).

All in all, I easily spend a quarter of my monthly income on my fitness addiction and its many accessories and accoutrements. I know I am in a privileged position to be able to do this – I am mortgage-free and childless. But I also know people with equally expensive habits and addictions – coffee, trainers, weekly facials – and at least my choice of slot machine keeps me healthy.

This isn’t the once-a-week evening step class your mother might have gone to in the local church hall. For a growing number of people I know, being “into fitness” is front and centre of their social calendars; a lifestyle and identity rather than simply a hobby.

I’m talking about the friend who started a fitness account on Instagram, alongside her day job as an accountant, and now has 20,000 followers. The pal who has quit cooking and has all her meals freshly made and delivered to her office by a fancy health food service, with the calories and grams of protein stamped boldly on the packaging.

And before you get all Kirstie Allsopp on me and say that this, along with avocado toast, Pret coffees and Netflix is the reason why my generation is struggling to get on the property ladder, I can explain.

Like many women I know, I got my first taste of endorphins in my early twenties at Barry’s Bootcamp, a global chain of studio-style gyms that run punishing back-to-back 60-minute classes, a brutal mix of sprints on the treadmill and weights on the floor. Held in a pitch-black room lit only by red lights, it was unlike any class I’d been to at my local community gym – part workout, part rave. The instructors were notoriously hot – the men tall and ripped, the women lean with pert bums and enviable abs. They were also famously mean, shouting and often swearing at you to keep running. “The best investment you will make in your life today is here in this room,” instructors would bellow over pumping house music. It was sadistic, but I loved it. So I coughed up, time and time again, at £18 a pop (classes are now £24 each). Part of the appeal was the aura of exclusivity, achieved by an online booking system as competitive as ➤

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the classes themselves. You can book only one week in advance. I've been known to set alarms for 6am simply to grab my spot.

And having got us hooked, the hundreds of boutique gyms now open across the country know how to keep us keen. While "the gym" used to be a male-dominated space, sparse and scruffy, populated almost exclusively by muscular guys pumping iron, today these places are more like spas – stylish, female-friendly and marketed largely to women. The changing room counters are lined with tiny bowls of hair ties, mints, tampons and cotton wool. The towels are huge and soft. The showers are equipped with delicious-smelling gels and hair masks and there are expensive skin products laid out ready for you to use. By the mirrors there are GHD straighteners and Dyson hairdryers. And if there's good lighting (there often is), the selfies are practically begging to be taken.

For many gym bunnies of my generation, being into fitness has very little to do with actually doing any exercise. It's about being *seen* doing exercise. Regardless of how many calories you burn, looking like you invest in yourself is the fashionable bit.

It's not just about sweating. It's about status. The gym is our Soho House or Groucho Club, although the membership works out more expensive. Last weekend I went to BXR City, a new boutique gym that counts the boxer Anthony Joshua and pop heart-throbs Liam Payne and Harry Styles among its fans. It's on the 25th floor of a skyscraper overlooking the River Thames and the views are extraordinary. The facilities and kit are incredible. There's even a climbing wall on the glass window. I was one of the few people doing any exercise.

Everyone – including an influencer from *Love Island* and another "celebrity" from Netflix's dating reality TV show *Too Hot to Handle* – was far busier taking photos up against the glass. The men had their shirts off. The women were in booty shorts and sports bras. In one corner was a young woman who had brought a professional photographer with her. I'm sure all these people enjoyed whatever workout they did, but the bit they enjoyed most was telling everyone about it on social media.

Not unlike other hotspots, such as nightclubs and members' clubs, gyms are now a space to meet members of the opposite (or same, or either) sex.

"Gyms are sexually charged places, without a doubt," says James, a 29-year-old personal trainer friend of mine. "All those pumping muscles and endorphins. They are hotbeds of horniness."

Ever since gyms reopened last year, they have become new social centres. They provide a place to relax and recharge and, for my single friends, also a place to find dates.



'I can't afford a therapist. Exercise has a positive effect on my mental health and I won't compromise on that'

"Gyms are a melting pot of different types of people with one shared goal: you all care about how you look," says my friend Jessica, 28, who over the past six months has hooked up with three people from her gym. "Throw them all together in one room, turn down the lights, pump up the music and sparks are bound to fly."

Jessica's tactics include, but are not restricted to, going to male-dominated weights classes, standing near the front, taking her top off to reveal her bra halfway through, staying late afterwards and asking for help when she's putting away her weights. "Everyone feels so good about themselves at the end of a class," she says. "I find people are a lot chattier."

For anyone too shy to deploy Jessica's methods there's Fitafy, a dating app "for fitness singles", which I heard about from a gym friend, Chloe, 24. "It's basically like Hinge or Tinder but for people who are obsessed with working out," she says.

Rather than details about their likes, dislikes, jobs or education, the profiles of men on Fitafy are filled with how much they lift, their favourite forms of exercise, their calories and step count, how much protein they eat and their intermittent fasting regime. Of course, it's a virtual shop window of shirtless pictures and mirror selfies.

With the possibility of sex on the schedule, a grimy old T-shirt and shorts aren't going to

cut it at the gym. Today's gymwear is designed to flatter the hell out of our bodies, to perk up bums, push up boobs and pull in waists. The global gym clothing market, known as athleisure, is worth a whopping \$306 billion (£243 billion).

"It's basically like having an entirely separate wardrobe," my housemate said one evening as she was laying out her pristine gym outfit for the next day. "I've got my work wardrobe, my weekend wardrobe and my workout wardrobe."

And whereas a few years ago you could get away with buying cheap, mass-produced, fast-fashion leggings, bras and tops, today the most fashionable gymwear is sustainable, often made from recycled plastic bottles. Which is great for the environment, but less so for my wallet. Recycled leggings from the British activewear brand Tala cost £43.

It's not all shallow selfies and wearing the "right" labels though. Given that millennials are renowned for high rates of mental health problems, our gyms are our sanctuaries and exercise a sort of substitute therapy.

"I can't afford a therapist, but I can afford to go to a nice gym," says my friend Rachel, 29, who goes to the gym six times a week and sometimes twice a day. "Exercise has a hugely positive effect on my mental health and I won't compromise on that."

Another friend, Beth, feels the same. "It's not just about the exercise. That actually has very little to do with it. Being in a nice environment where everything feels luxurious just makes you feel better."

I agree. I've done budget gyms – the Ryanairs and easyJets of the industry. They did the job. I worked out and they were fine, but they made exercise a chore. It wasn't fun. The more I spend on a stylish, luxurious gym, the more often I find I want to go and the happier it makes me to be there.

And while my addiction has left me poorer, it's made me fitter. It's also equipped me with some niche knowledge about London's fitness scene. I can reel off which classes have the hottest instructors (GrndHouse, Paddington, 7am, Tuesdays. Go), which changing room has the best hair straighteners (Third Space, Tower Bridge) and which has the nicest shower gel (Barry's Bootcamp).

And while I admit I could exercise more self-restraint over how much I spend – do I really need to go to all those one-off classes on top of my extortionate membership? – I don't see myself dialling down my habit any time soon. Where would I go to get my endorphins, burn calories, meet friends (and potential partners), take cute photos and show off my new matchy-matchy workout outfit, all under one (admittedly expensive) roof? ■

With thanks to F45 Training, Soho



Pope Lonergan, 30

Confessions of a care home worker

'Am I dead? I feel quite dead,' says Sylvia. 'Nah, you're fine,' I tell her

Stand-up comedian Pope Loneragan spent ten years working in care homes. The 30-year-old from Essex returned at the start of the pandemic when comedy venues closed. Here's everything you ever wanted to know – and a few things you probably didn't – about Britain's care system

PORTRAIT Mark Harrison



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It's an hour until my shift in the care home ends. Sylvia's in bed, gumming a custard cream. I sit in the reclining chair next to Sylvia, scrolling through my phone, because the mad rush of assisting people to their own beds – the adrenaline spike of bending, hoisting, lifting, removing, wiping, emptying, folding, spreading, plumping, and repeat, repeat, repeat – can be exhausting.

Physically arduous and mentally taxing. But with a 14-hour shift almost behind me, it's the most relaxed I've felt all week. And because I've cared for Sylvia for many years, we can share a comfortable silence without worrying about filling it.

"Can you answer me this?" says Sylvia, after a few minutes of contemplation.

"Yeah. What's wrong?" I reply.

"And you have to be honest with me."

"Of course."

"Am I dead now? I feel quite dead," she says, almost cheerfully.

"Nah. You're fine. You're not dead."

"Oh."

There's a pause. "Maybe tomorrow then," she replies.

I'm a stand-up comedian and (recovering) drug addict. For nearly a decade I've also worked as a care assistant, or support worker, or carer. (You can use these interchangeably.)

The term "wiping arses" has become a stand-in for the entire field of social care. It's one task of many, but wiping an arse ("wearing their haemorrhoid as a cufflink") seems to represent not only abjection and waste but also the status of the people who carry out these duties; the misconception (perpetuated, unfortunately, by other medical staff) that we're unskilled, uncaring and unprofessional. It's mucky work. But work that "just needs to be done". And because this is the public image of the care profession, for me, when I started, it wasn't a calling – merely a matter of convenience. (I needed a job and my cousin knew someone.)

For most carers, waking up and confronting the day can be a challenge. It's that moment where you realise you're about to be laden with any number of physically and mentally demanding tasks. For a Sunday shift I'm paid £1 extra per hour. And my hourly rate is the minimum wage. I usually work 42 hours per week (three 14-hour shifts) and I'm on most Sundays (unless I'm gigging on the Saturday), but other carers are contractually obliged to work two weekends per month. I have migrant colleagues who work 70-82 hours per week.

According to a University of Massachusetts study, care workers face injury rates that are more than twice as high as those of construction workers. As I'm often the only male carer, the heavy-duty labour – the kneeling, the squatting, the raised arms,

NEARLY 700,000 PEOPLE WORK IN CARE HOMES IN THE UK

the flexed trunk, the twisting, the lifting – is usually left for me. I'm only 30 but my coccyx aches, and my right shoulder has dropped. My brother (who works as a strength and conditioning coach) says I have the tightest hamstrings he's ever seen.

I'm often apprehensive about the responsibility that comes with being a carer. Even now, after years of service, there'll be a moment during a shift when I step outside myself and, glancing at this shrivelled person in front of me, am aware of how utterly helpless they are – and that all responsibility for them has been ceded to me, a man who

where the bottom line is the driving priority.

The morning is the most laborious and time-constrained part of the day. Rushing to complete a task within a given time frame might be effective when you're working in manufacturing, but in the care professions it's a recipe for disaster. And it will always lead to institutionalisation, because it doesn't make room for the mess of being a person.

What if Joan wants to try on another dress before going to the dining room? What if Jane wants to finish listening to the podcast about anal sex? (I once played an episode of *This American Life* that unexpectedly mentioned anal sex. Jane, whose hair I was brushing, exclaimed, "Anal sex! It's far too early for any anal sex!") It doesn't matter. We receive an implicit instruction to refuse to accommodate delays – because residents have to be in the dining room, starting breakfast, at 9am. If they're not, it has a domino effect and sets us back for the rest of the day.

(There was one carer who'd whip the duvet off a resident if they weren't ready to get out of bed yet, so I once poured a bucket of cold

It takes 2 hours to move 22 residents from room to room. It's a constant game of Whac-A-Mole

once couldn't pay his phone bill because he'd rinsed his money on UFC trading cards.

Often, when I arrive at work, I'll hear the inevitable, though dreaded, announcement: "Just got a call. Two are sick. We're down to four." Or, even worse: "It's just you and Ligaya. Domestic staff are going to try to help out."

This is a terrible practice, but we're working for a company that's reluctant to plug the gaps shelling out for agency staff, who cost more. This is why one resident managed to get over the road at the previous care home I worked in. The most dispiriting part: Mum, who worked in care homes when I was a kid, tells me this was happening back in the late Eighties too. The same fault lines that caused avoidable deaths or unnecessary hospital admissions are still there today.

If I'm sleep-deprived, I'll get through about eight Diet Cokes by the end of a shift. Because of my own history with addiction I notice signs of dependence throughout the workforce. Carers rinsing their own supply of painkillers. The copious amounts of Monster, Diet Coke and coffee consumed as people rush through an unending list of tasks. Overhearing the squink of a vodka cap from inside the toilet cubicle connected to the staffroom, followed by a gulp and a sharp intake of breath. This is just one of the consequences of the high burnout rate for those working in the care sector – a sector

water over her and said, "That's what it feels like to them.")

It might sound a bit strange, but achieving the satisfying geometry, and the immaculacy, of a well-made bed is a job I take pride in. It has a similar quality to *kintsugi*, the Japanese art of putting broken pottery back together again, although *kintsugi* embraces – even glorifies – imperfections by using gold to draw attention to the cracks. I, on the other hand, am trying to erase the tangle of sheets or the flakes of dead skin gathered in the creases by stripping and changing the bedclothes and restoring the whole thing to its previous condition – only for it to be messed up again. It's an art, bed-making. And so is changing an incontinence pad. It's a shame the clean ➡

75 PER CENT OF SOCIAL CARE WORKERS HAVE REPORTED A DECLINE IN THEIR MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE PANDEMIC



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pad and clean bed are then spoiled by a leaking resident. But this pride is in stark contrast to the dump 'n' run approach of some of the lazy pricks I have encountered. They'll even throw a duvet over damp urine stains.

In the staff room there's a new memo on the wall-length pinboard, divided into two columns: "Things You Might Say About A Client/Things You Should Say Instead". The first example: "Mrs Lady is mental/Mrs Lady has frontotemporal dementia". To be told how to speak is one of many little indignities at the hand of unwanted corporate paternalism that chips away at you. With this memo there's an insinuation from "upper management" that we can't be trusted to have a conversation with another person without a script. It turns carers into automatons – which is how most of upper management sound during site visits anyway, crouching in front of residents and talking to them with a patronising tilt of the head. I remember one of them once strode into our dining room wearing a three-piece suit and asked, "Is everyone having a safe afternoon, ladies and gentlemen?"

The fixation on profit has been disastrous for the care sector – and even the most trivial and petty acts of insubordination can have a positive impact on a work shift. I don't care what the company directors say. We won't be using peanut butter sparingly! I'll turn lights on when I'm leaving the room! I'll make sure I hit every corner when transporting food or medicine trolleys! I'll take up smoking just so I can do it near an oxygen tank!

It usually takes about two hours to finish breakfast as transferring 22 residents from room to room is demanding. Approximately a dozen of these need to be hoisted, three are bed-bound, and the remainder require a walking aid plus a carer to supervise them. Almost everyone needs help being taken to the toilet. Nine of them are assisted with their food. There are also catheters to empty, incontinence pads to change, arguments to break up, a few remaining beds to be made, family members to appease, a dining room to be cleaned and organised in preparation for lunchtime, dishes to be washed and dried (by hand), wounds to be redressed, drinks to be topped up, more teas to be made... The list goes on. When there are only two carers and one resident needs to go to the toilet the remaining carer is unable to leave the lounge, where the majority of the residents are sitting, in case one tries to stand up and takes a tumble. It's a constant game of Whac-A-Mole. Once all the loose ends have been tied up, that's when we can start the paperwork.

I overhear Susan calling out. She looks tanned and healthy. Her teeth are her own. And she still wears clothes for style as well as

44 PER CENT OF CARE HOMES DON'T EMPLOY ANY AGENCY STAFF TO COVER STAFF SHORTAGES

comfort. Some sequins, some lace, some off-the-shoulder numbers. A young-ish old. "Marvellous for her age."

She's married to Cliff, who, like his wife, is a healthy-looking 80-year-old. Tall and broad-shouldered. A former wrestler. And he, too, has a deep tan. I always imagine them as characters in a John Updike novel – having never read a single John Updike novel. But he's clearly devoted to his wife and makes the effort to visit her every day after lunch.

She had a stroke a few years back that left her paralysed on one side of her body. Her right hand is permanently clenched – and so tightly that her fingernails are embedded in her palm. She was given a "therapy carrot" (a carrot-shaped cushion that's inserted into the hand) to pry the fingers away from the palm and prevent puncturing. But carers often forget to put it in place. It's a small oversight but one with knock-on consequences. Dirty nails. Open sores. Initial discomfort leading to the pain of swollen fingers. And, finally, the smell that confirms infection. By that point, you're nothing but the smell. And Tracy – tactless, irresponsible Tracy, one of the other carers – will hold her nose around you.

Susan's dementia has made her paranoid. She's always worried Cliff's cheating on her. Or that he hasn't come to visit. Or assumes the other residents are conspiring against her. As a result, she cries a lot and throws around accusations. On one occasion, as I was assisting her onto the toilet, she responded curtly to my small talk.

"What's up, Susan?" I asked. "What have I done to annoy you?"

"Oh, you know what you've done," she replied, turning her head away.

"I really don't know! Let me know and I can try to rectify it."

She banged her fist against the railing next to the toilet, like a stropky toddler.

"I want you to have sex with me, Cliff! Is that too much to ask? I want you to want to have sex with me."

I was shell-shocked.

"God, no! Susan, no! No, no, no. I'm not Cliff. I am not your husband," I exclaimed. "I'm Pope. I'm your carer."

"You don't have to make up a whole new

identity to get out of loving me, Cliff!" she shouted, her eyes beginning to water. (At that point, I had to call for a female carer to supervise. When I explained the situation, duly mortified, she found it very funny.)

But even though she has these delusional episodes, she retains plenty of day-to-day information: who the carers are, information about our lives, conversations we've had. And she recognises me (most of the time), and always says she's relieved when I'm on a shift, and refers back to anecdotes I've told. But still, there are gaps in her knowledge: she usually knows me as "Paul". (I'm always correcting her on this but "Pope" never sticks.) And in my spare time, I'm apparently restoring a 19th-century steam locomotive.

"How's the train coming along, Paul?" asks Susan. "Getting there! Just mending the... tubes... of steam," I reply, failing to summon any convincing railway terminology.

It's important to demonstrate engagement with a resident and stay close, in case their hearing fails them. Sometimes considering any heavy subject matter, I affect an almost pious bearing. But if the situation requires it, I switch gears. I can gossip! I actually had a subscription to *Heat* at one time. Sometimes Susan and I will look at "scandalous" celebrity outfits and she'll ask, "Would your wife wear that?" (I haven't got a wife. I haven't got a train. What the f*** am I doing?) This is a good example of the social involvement that helps to improve a resident's well-being. It doesn't have to be elaborate.

Whenever I'm speaking or writing about elderly care, I try to avoid sentimentality. All it does is provide a palatable version of ageing that is unhelpful. The knock-on effect is this: when a member of the public is presented with, say, coprophagia (the eating of faeces) or libidinous behaviour from a relative who used to be a nun (yes, really – I'll leave the details to your imagination), it can be too much. And when people reach their limit, they tend to look away, which leads to neglect. I'll go as far as to say that I find saccharine representations of care homes moderately unethical.

I give Simon, in room 2, a quick wave as I walk past. (He doesn't see me. He's too busy steadying a miniature bottle of Jameson as he pours it into his coffee. If you catch him in the morning, you'll find him pouring it onto his cornflakes.) Simon and I once shared a sneaky Irish coffee while I was working on my birthday. I didn't realise how much he'd poured in. He sat on his chair; I sat on the edge of his bed. The mixture of alcohol and an overheated room put us both to sleep – and I woke up slumped to the left, my forehead pressing into the edge of the headboard.

Continues on page 45



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José Pizarro (right) with his family in Talávan, in Extremadura



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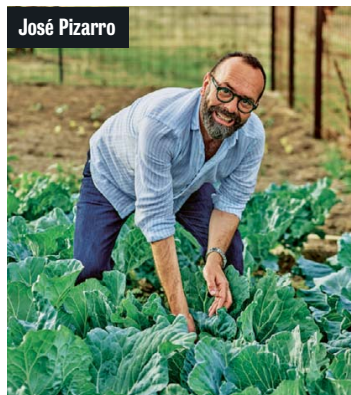


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José Pizarro



José Pizarro was a latecomer to cooking. Not for him the normal tales of helping his mother or grandmother in the kitchen from a young age. “I started cooking in my twenties. When I was a boy, I wasn’t allowed to be in the kitchen much at all,” the 50-year-old chef recalls. His mother was busy helping his father on the family farm in Extremadura in western Spain, but still found time to put three meals on the table. “It was her way of showing her love.”

That doesn’t mean he doesn’t have early food memories. He still found a way to sneak in “to absorb the atmosphere and take in all the lovely smells”. Now all it takes is a subtle smell of chickpeas or a stew to take him back. “Wonderful memories are invoked every time I cook. Whenever I put certain ingredients together on a plate, I remember something from the past – happy memories of family and friends.” Here he picks some of his favourite dishes, which, with his five restaurants, have helped him become the godfather of Spanish cooking in this country. **Tony Turnbull**

TUNA TORTILLA

Serves 2

This is a dish we cook regularly at home in London. I love to eat it either hot or cold, with a strong extra virgin olive oil mayonnaise. My mother’s version of this dish is simpler, with just egg and tuna, resulting in the flatter style of tortilla preferred in northern Spain. Always use good-quality,



PHOTOGRAPHS
Emma Lee

fresh eggs. My mum’s are normally from her hens, laid that morning, so she’s got an unfair advantage. Whether you make it her way or my way, it’s delicious.

- 8 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 1 onion, very finely sliced
- 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 220g jar tuna steaks in olive oil, drained
- 1 tbsp finely chopped flat-leaf parsley
- 5 free-range eggs
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

1. Pour 3 tbsp olive oil into a large frying pan over a medium-low

heat. Add the onion and cook for 10-15 minutes until really lovely and soft. Add the garlic and cook for a few minutes more.

2. Tip into a bowl and add the tuna. Flake the tuna with a fork and mix everything together. Stir in the parsley.

3. In a separate bowl, beat the eggs, then pour them over the onion and tuna mixture and season well.

4. Pour the remaining 5 tbsp oil into an 18-20cm nonstick frying pan over a high heat. When the oil is hot, add the egg mixture. Swirl the pan until the mixture starts to set around the edges, then reduce the heat to medium-

low and cook for 4-5 minutes until the tortilla just starts to set. The bottom and sides should be golden, but the middle will still be quite loose.

5. Cover the pan with a flat lid or board and carefully turn out the tortilla onto it. Don’t worry that it is still quite runny. It will all come back together when you continue to cook it.

6. Slide the tortilla back into the pan and, over a low heat, use a spatula to tuck the edges under to give it its characteristic curved look. Cook for a couple more minutes, then turn onto a board and serve. It should still be juicy in the middle when you cut it. ➔



CLAMS IN SPICY TOMATO SAUCE

Serves 4

For me, clams are such a beautiful thing to cook – and, of course, to eat. They're so versatile. It's exciting to explore different ways to cook with them. Here, I'm using different spices, which at first you might think will take away from the flavour of the clams. Don't worry. This is not the case. Follow the recipe and you'll notice how well they go with the heat from the chillies. Just perfect.

- 3 dried ancho chillies
- Small pinch of dried chilli flakes
- 1 tsp cumin seeds, lightly toasted
- ½ tsp sweet smoked pimentón de la Vera
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 tbsp red wine vinegar
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 3 tbsp olive oil

- 800g tomatoes, chopped
- 2kg clams, cleaned
- Small handful of flat-leaf parsley, chopped
- Crusty bread, to serve

1. Rehydrate the ancho chillies in hot water for 20 minutes, then deseed them and put in a heavy mortar or small food processor. Add the chilli flakes, toasted cumin seeds, pimentón, garlic and vinegar. Season and mash with a pestle or whizz to a paste, adding a splash of water to loosen.
2. Heat the oil in a saucepan over a medium heat. Add the chilli paste and cook for 5 minutes, then add the tomatoes and 75ml water. Cook for 10 minutes.
3. When the sauce is almost ready, heat a large, lidded heavy-based pan over a high heat. Add the clams and 100ml water and cover to steam for 1-2 minutes until the shells open. Remove and discard any that do not open and then tip the clams, along with their juices, into the spicy tomato sauce. Toss well and scatter with parsley. Serve with crusty bread.



RICE AND CLAMS

Serves 4

This recipe is a great example of how, with just a few ingredients, you can make a very happy meal in a short time. We often cook this at home when we fancy something that tastes a bit special, but don't want to spend too long over it. It's a dish you can make throughout the year. We find it goes down just as well at midsummer garden lunches as it does at autumn or winter dinner parties. It's comfort food, but mouthwateringly good – and healthy too.

- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 1 banana shallot, finely chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, finely sliced
- 1 fresh bay leaf
- 2 tsp tomato puree
- 300g bomba rice or other short-grain rice
- 750ml fresh fish broth or stock
- Handful of fresh marjoram leaves

- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 500g clams, cleaned

1. Heat the oil in a shallow casserole dish or paella pan over a low heat. Add the shallot and fry for 5 minutes to soften. Add the garlic, bay leaf and tomato puree and fry for 1 minute more.
2. Stir in the rice, then increase the heat to medium-high. Toast the rice in the oil for 1 minute, then add the broth, marjoram leaves and plenty of seasoning. Stir and cover, then reduce the heat to low and simmer for 12 minutes until the rice is almost cooked and still lovely and soupy.
3. Add the clams, then cover once more and cook for a further 4 minutes until the clams are open (discard any that remain closed). Serve.

MIGAS WITH FRIED EGG, CHORIZO AND BACON

Serves 4

This recipe takes me back to one of my earliest memories: my grandfather watching the evening news while cutting stale bread for making migas the next day. Migas is not low in calories – but then nothing good is. Back at home, my family use just olive oil to cook the garlic and bread and then cook the meat separately, serving it with a café con leche. I like to cook the chorizo first and then stir it back in at the end – and I love it with a great glass of red wine.

- 250g stale crusty bread, torn into large chunks
- 100ml olive oil
- 120g chorizo, diced
- 3 garlic cloves, bashed
- Sea salt
- 4 thick slices streaky bacon
- 4 free-range eggs

1. Put the stale bread chunks in a dish and sprinkle with 3 tbsp water. Cover with a damp tea towel and leave for 3 hours (or overnight).
2. Heat the oil in a large pan over a medium heat and gently fry the chorizo and garlic for 2-3 minutes until the chorizo is golden. Remove with a slotted spoon and set aside on a plate.
3. Add 5 tbsp water to the pan along with a pinch of sea salt. Add a handful of the bread and mix really well, then add the rest of the bread to the pan and increase the heat to medium. Cook, stirring occasionally, for 15 minutes, until the chunks of bread are golden and crisp, but still tender in the middle.
4. Meanwhile, in a nonstick pan, fry the bacon for 3-5 minutes until golden and crisp. Remove and set aside with the chorizo.
5. Keeping the pan on the heat, crack in the eggs and fry them in the bacon fat. Once golden, stir the chorizo and garlic back into the migas (the bread chunks). Serve with the bacon and eggs. ➤



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PINCHOS MORUNOS

Serves 6

Ahh! Delicious pinchos. We love these in my family, and they're probably more popular in Extremadura and Andalusia than anywhere else, although you will find different versions throughout Spain. They're actually a remnant of Moorish cuisine, similar to kebabs. In Extremadura, we call them *pinchitos*, because we love the little things. At home, we always use good-quality pork for this dish, or sometimes free-range chicken. My preference is to use pork loin, but any good cut of high-quality meat will work. Don't try to be posh with this one. Eat it with fries and a tomato salad. It's devilishly good.

- 2 tsp sweet smoked pimentón de la Vera
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- ½ tsp dried chilli flakes
- 1 tsp ground cumin
- 1 tbsp sherry vinegar
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 800g pork loin, cut into 2.5cm chunks
- Tomato salad, to serve

1. In a small bowl, mix the pimentón, oregano, chilli and cumin with the vinegar and oil. Season well and pour into a dish.
2. Add the diced pork and toss well, then leave to marinate for at least 2 hours or, even better, overnight.
3. Prepare your barbecue with good-quality charcoal and light it. Thread the meat onto metal skewers and barbecue them for 5-6 minutes, turning every so often, until the meat is charred and tender. Serve with patatas fritas and a simple tomato salad.

TO COOK INDOORS

This is easy to cook on a griddle pan or under a hot grill. Just remember to turn regularly to get that nice charring on the meat.

Patatas fritas

- 900g floury potatoes, peeled and cut into chips
- 1 litre vegetable or olive oil
- Sea salt



1. Put the chips into a large pan of cold salted water and bring to the boil. Simmer for 2-3 minutes, then drain and return to the pan over a low heat to dry the potatoes.
2. Pour the oil into a deep sauté pan. You want it to be about 4cm

deep. Heat the oil to 180C or until a cube of bread browns in 30 seconds. Add the potatoes and fry for 3-4 minutes until golden. Drain on a plate lined with kitchen roll and season with sea salt. Set aside, keeping them warm. ➡



TOMATO, BEETROOT, WHITE BEAN AND POMEGRANATE SALAD

Serves 6

- 2 beetroots
- 1 tsp olive oil
- 1 x 400g tin white beans, such as butter beans, drained and rinsed
- 700g heritage tomatoes, roughly chopped
- Seeds from 1 pomegranate

For the thyme dressing

- 1½ tbsp sherry vinegar
- 2 fresh thyme sprigs, leaves picked, with flowers if you can
- 1½ tbsp pomegranate molasses
- 3-4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil

To serve (optional)

- Manchego
- Rocket leaves
- Crusty bread

1. Preheat the oven to 180C (200C non-fan). Rub the beetroots with the oil and wrap each one in kitchen foil. Roast for 45 minutes until tender. Allow to cool until they are cool enough

to handle, then peel and chop.

2. Put the beetroots in a bowl with the white beans, tomatoes and pomegranate seeds and toss together.

3. Make the dressing. Blend the sherry vinegar, thyme and pomegranate molasses together, then gradually whisk in the extra virgin olive oil. Drizzle all over the warm salad and toss together.

4. Let it sit for 10 minutes, then serve with manchego, rocket and crusty bread.

ESCALIVADA SALAD WITH ROASTED TOMATO DRESSING

Serves 4

My escalivada recipes share one very important element: roasted vegetables. For this version, I've blended the roasted tomatoes with the juices from the other roasted vegetables, along with a dash of vinegar. It makes a superb dressing that is perfect with this warm, tasty salad.

- 2 aubergines, sliced
- 2 red peppers
- 1 yellow pepper



- 2 red onions, cut into wedges
- 3 tomatoes, halved
- 1 garlic bulb, cloves separated
- 4 thyme sprigs, leaves picked
- 5 tbsp olive oil, plus 2 tbsp for frying
- 2 tsp pimentón de la Vera
- 2 tsp sherry vinegar
- 4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 100g stale bread, torn
- 1 tbsp capers
- 50g manchego, shaved

1. Preheat the oven to 200C (220C non-fan). Put the aubergine, peppers, onion wedges, tomatoes, garlic and thyme on a large baking sheet. Drizzle with 5 tbsp oil and sprinkle with the pimentón. Toss to coat well.

2. Roast for 20 minutes, then remove the garlic and set aside. Continue to roast the other veg for a further 20-30 minutes until the pepper skins are blackened and the rest of the vegetables are sticky and tender.

3. Put the peppers in a dish and cover with clingfilm. Leave to stand for 10 minutes, or until cool enough to handle, then remove

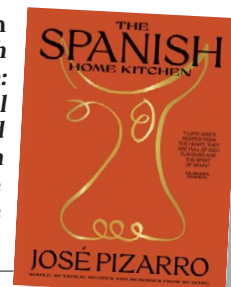
the skins and seeds and thinly slice the flesh. Save any juices to add to the dressing.

4. To make the roasted tomato dressing, put the roasted tomatoes in a blender with the vinegar and extra virgin olive oil. Season well and blitz, adding any juices from the peppers and a splash of water until you have a dressing-like consistency.

5. Heat 2 tbsp olive oil in a frying pan over a medium-high heat. Add the torn bread and fry for 5-10 minutes until golden. Drain on a plate lined with kitchen roll and season with sea salt.

6. Toss all the veg in a dish with the capers, manchego, croutons, reserved garlic and dressing and serve it straightaway. ■

Extracted from
The Spanish Home Kitchen:
Simple, Seasonal Recipes and Memories from My Home by José Pizarro (Hardie Grant, £27)



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I'd been asleep for 45 minutes. I said I'd got the deep indentation on my forehead when I hit my head while draining a catheter bag.

We have an event coordinator whose primary function is to arrange a schedule of suitable activities, but in my experience, they're mostly roped in to reduce the overflow of paperwork from the manager's office. The only time they might bust out the big guns is the day of the Care Quality Commission inspection (always announced ahead of time, a major flaw in my opinion).

On one such occasion, our event coordinator invited a zoo to the care home. Or, more precisely, an assortment of animals who were safe to gather in the conservatory. I even have a photo of an oblivious Dorothy reading a newspaper with a rabbit curled up on her lap, a couple of bald guinea pigs squeezed between the armrests, and a pair of lovebirds perched on her head, nestling in her fine gossamer hair (which her daughter still lovingly styles into a phantom coiffure).

Susan W, while scratching a rabbit's floppy ears, was asked if she was "having a nice time" by one of the CQC inspectors. "Oh, yes," she replied. "On a normal day we never have anything like this."

Slight confusion or a faltering independence differs from the residents who suffer with advanced dementia (or "double dementia"; or "late-stage dementia"; or, in the words of Tracy, "the ones who are proper f***ed"). The doubles live on the two floors above us. It's a limbo within limbo. Some of the residents drift in and out of bedrooms or communal spaces. The rest of them are either bed-bound or dumped in chairs and pointed at the television. In the eyes of some of the staff, they're nothing but mushrooms on a log.

For years I was embarrassed to say I was a care worker. The stigmatisation caused by abuse caught on hidden cameras. The meagre Mickey-Mouse-cutting-a-baked-bean-into-thin-slices wage packet. People assume you're doing "grunt's work" to make up for past misbehaviour.

I was embarrassed of saying I cared for people. What kind of nutty meritocracy are we living in when, socially, caring for people puts you in the "loser" category?

During Covid, it was strange hearing politicians and public figures provide damning assessments of the social care sector as if they were imparting new information. Before, I thought they were privy to this information but decided to ignore it. Now I was thinking: was the sector so neglected that people actually didn't know how bad things were?

In the care home the "testing station" was initially set up in the space between the automatic doors. A reception window was used as a "serving hatch" for testing kits. But

40 PER CENT OF COVID DEATHS BETWEEN MARCH AND JUNE 2021 WERE CARE HOME RESIDENTS

eventually they moved it to a side room full of unused mattresses and walking aids. Once the lateral flow test was completed, we were supposed to wait for 30 minutes – but the majority of workers pre-empted a negative result, wrote "Negative" next to their name on the "Covid Register" (along with the test's ID) and started mixing with residents almost instantly. And even this tiny change to the testing station saw an increase in infection rates, as the walk from the entrance to the side room left a five-second "infection window" – unlike the compression chamber of the space between the automatic doors.

On testing, there were really heated disputes about balancing economic need (working to feed children and pay rent) with civic, and medical, responsibility. (And carers

anti-establishment bent finding ways to bypass these new pandemic regulations when it would have just been easier to follow them. (One geezer thought he was being really clever by putting a vertical slice across his mask so he could take a sip of his Lucozade through it. He could just pull the mask down!)

The strangest thing about the pandemic was family members who were a ghostly presence in their parent's life – only ever seen in photos – suddenly taking an interest in their care. And after getting slapped with a monologue about "my human rights" this one geezer gave his mum a thumbs up (as she turned to me and asked, "Who's that weirdo?") before telling some of the young, female staff members he had a £30,000 watch. (He also goaded me into a chin-up competition on the garden trestle. And I'm one million per cent fine with the fact he beat me.)

I decide to check on Sylvia. She's in bed, with her eyes closed, but muttering to herself.

"Am I in hell?" she asks, as soon as I step into the room.

"Good hearing, Sylvia!" I say.

"Is that you, Pope?"

"Yes, it's me," I reply, sluggishly.

It's been a long day. Mentally I'm winding down.

There's a pause. "Would you be sad if

During Covid, relatives suddenly took an interest. 'Who's that weirdo?' one woman said about her son

receive no sick pay from their employer so they have to rely on statutory sick pay.) Loose factions started to form: those who were pro-grassing (as a public health measure) and those who blamed the management, or the company, or the social care system for the "sin" of "Working with Covid" and being forced to lie about it.

In the same vein, a big source of care worker factionalism was vaccine hesitancy. And a lot of these care homes have very multicultural work forces (which, for me, is a massive boon) but, in one particular care home, the for/against seemed to be divided along ethnic/racial lines. This inflamed pre-existing tensions between migrant workers and English workers. (It's common among the workforce in care homes. There's a lot of antipathy over language barriers or what some perceive as cultural disparities in "care work" – or how to define "good care".)

Mask enforcement? Draconian, or necessary? That was another constant source of friction. Something that got absorbed into the office politics. And a weird development was those with a slightly petty

I died?" she asks. "Yes, of course!" I reply. I would. She's one of the few residents I'll mourn – properly mourn – when she passes. It's not that I don't love or feel affection towards the other residents. It's just you become jaded to the terminal prognosis, the palliative care, the multitudinous dead. And then there's the financial imperative of filling the recently vacated rooms as quickly as possible. You're not given time to acclimatise. One in, one out. And usually I'd think of it as the natural course of things but, of course, it's not natural. The absence of rites or a ceremonial passing-over directly preceding the event isn't natural. Even elephants have those! But in care homes, death is nothing but an administrative duty – another task to be ticked off the list. But when Sylvia dies, and they shove another person in this room, to me it'll be like an invasion, an improper encroachment on Sylvia's home. ■

Extracted from I'll Die After Bingo: the Unlikely Story of my Decade as a Care Home Assistant by Pope Lonergan, published by Ebury Press on June 16 (£16.99)

WHY I SWAPPED MY GLAMOROUS HOLLYWOOD LIFE FOR A DERELICT PILE IN ROCHDALE



What would make a Tinseltown insider give up his career to renovate a stately home in Lancashire? American Hopwood DePree is on a mission to save what he believes is his ancestral home. Jane Mulkerrins meets him

PORTRAITS Tom Jackson

Hopwood DePree, 52, at Hopwood Hall



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Lady Hopwood on the front lawn in the 1880s



A middle-aged American actor, disenchanted with Los Angeles life, falls for an ageing Brit, sells up in sunny California and relocates wholesale to our small, soggy island where – while navigating vitamin D deficiency and confusing colloquialisms – he charms both the locals, who band together to support his highly ambitious (read: potentially harebrained) scheme, and the nation's aristos, who welcome him into their rarefied world of ancestral piles and shooting parties.

Except, in this Hollywood rom-com, the ageing Brit is a decrepit 15th-century manor house on the verge of condemnation outside Rochdale, and the American actor is, by his own admission, wholly inept at even rudimentary DIY, let alone large-scale historic reconstruction.

Hopwood DePree became de facto lord of the manor at Hopwood Hall in Middleton, Lancashire, in 2017. Such a wreck was the 600-year-old structure that no money even changed hands. He had only to prove to Rochdale council, its erstwhile caretaker, that he could show a workable plan to salvage, restore and sustain the crumbling edifice.

He is now five years into a vast, painstaking restoration of the 25-bedroom stately home, to which he hopes one day to welcome guests again, just as it once played host to overnighters including Lord Byron – who sent an enormous stone fireplace, still fully intact today, as a thank you – Frédéric Chopin and Guy Fawkes.

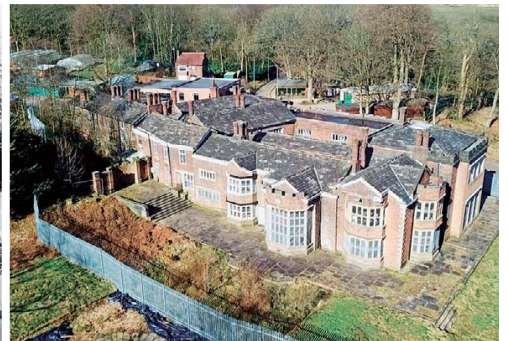
The restoration will cost an estimated £10 million, he tells me (a wildly conservative estimate I'd say, but I don't want to seem discouraging), of which just over £1 million has been raised and spent so far – from grants, applications, fundraising and DePree's own pocket – and only one tenth of the building is yet accessible without a hard hat. But, later this month, DePree is to hold a public open day, throwing wide the ancient 15ft doors to the three accessible rooms so far, plus one courtyard. He also hopes to live on site as soon as he is able – there's running water



'You can go to a place you've never been and feel like it's home, feel you belong there... It's hard to explain'



Top: Hopwood Hall in the 1880s. Above: the reception hall in, left, the 1880s and 2013. Below: aerial views from 1965 and 2017



now, and wi-fi, though no heating and, even on a warm, early summer's day, it's a good 10C colder indoors than out. In the meantime, he's written a (very wry, very funny) book about his decade-long restoration romance so far: *Downton Shabby: One American's Ultimate DIY Adventure Restoring his Family's English Castle*.

As the book's title suggests, it's not a completely random romance. DePree is, he believes, a descendent of the Hopwoods who owned the hall and the surrounding

estate – which once numbered several thousand acres – from sometime shortly after the Norman Conquest.

In that way that many history-hungry Americans research their lineage, however distant, far more keenly than most Brits ever bother to, DePree believes that his ancestors – via his mother's line – left England for America in the 1700s, founding the town of Hopwood in Pennsylvania. The family surname died out with his

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great-grandmother but when his grandfather, Herbert Hopwood Black, would sit him on his knee, “He told me stories of a vast area of rolling land called Hopwood in England, where our ancestors had built a magnificent castle.” DePree – christened Hopwood by his mother as a tribute to her father and his family – was enchanted if sceptical.

Shortly after he turned 40, his grandfather and father died within two years of one another. The loss of the two most important men in his life “left me reeling”, he recalls. His LA friends were mostly married and having families of their own, while he was still single and childless. “I was questioning everything: my career, my relationships, my life,” he says.

Where some might seek solace in drugs or alcohol, DePree turned to genealogy. There was, he says, something about tracing his ancestors online at ancestry.com and myheritage.com that gave him comfort.

One night he unearthed an article about a Lord Hopwood of Hopwood Hall and, less than a month later, was standing in front of the 13ft-high security fence surrounding it. The hall had, he says, with considerable understatement, “seen better days”. Derelict for three decades, its intricate lead windows were all either smashed or boarded up, trees were growing out of chimneys and vines through walls. Ceilings and floors had collapsed throughout. It was riddled with dry rot. Large parts of the roof were missing, allowing rain to pour in. Vandals broke in on a regular basis (hence the fence). Its caretaker, Bob, appointed by the council, predicted that in five to ten years, the hall would be in ruins.

Today, by stark contrast, Hopwood Hall is a hive of activity. Teams of builders in hard hats and hi-viz jackets lug hefty machinery in and out of entrances marked “Dangerous”, while gangs of volunteers tend to neat lawns and bountiful flowerbeds. Skips full of red bricks fill the courtyards – the estate once had its own clay pit from which the bricks for the Tudor section of the house were made – while the small family chapel is now a workshop where locals are learning to make lead windows.

I find DePree in one of the courtyards, finishing an interview with an American film crew. An improbably youthful 52, he is tall, slim and entirely black-clad, with bleached blond hair and dazzling teeth to match. He cuts an incongruous figure, infinitely more Sunset Strip than suburban Lancashire.

And yet it is immediately apparent how warmly the community has taken this spray-tanned blow-in to their bosom. I am met on the drive by Zena, a dervish in bright leggings and the driving force behind publicising DePree’s efforts with the hall, and Geri, who worked at the golf club next door until she defected to become DePree’s assistant, and Geoff, an amateur local historian (and once

The Earl and Countess of Derby



The Earl and Countess of Carnarvon at Highclere, aka Downton



He tried to use his Amex in the local chippy. ‘I was very much a fish out of water. Still am, I think’

the town’s undertaker), who whips out his laptop to show me photographs of the hall’s extraordinary Oak Room, covered wall-to-wall in 15th-century wooden carvings, as well as videos of DePree’s first visit, nine years ago.

What DePree lacks in practical skills, they agree, he makes up for in enthusiasm and optimism. “You can see his passion. He really motivates people,” says Geoff fondly. “He’d make a great prime minister.”

I disagree – he seems entirely decent and honest. He is also – unlike the vast majority of actors I’ve encountered – endearingly self-deprecating, appearing not to take himself at all seriously.

“I was very much a fish out of water. Still am, I think,” says DePree of his drastic relocation. “I’m still like, ‘Can I get this without the bread, please?’” He has struggled with both the concept and reality of black pudding, tried to pay with his American Express in the local chippy (“I learnt that lesson quickly after they laughed me out of there”) and, one sleepless night, trudged to the 24-hour petrol station hoping to buy sleeping tablets. “The cashier looked as if I’d asked him to sell me heroin.”

But, DePree soon deduced, the answer to every British problem is a brew. He recalls Bob the caretaker greeting him on one of his earliest visits. “He said, ‘The ceiling in the long corridor just collapsed, water is pouring into a leak in the Georgian room and a window in the chapel was just smashed by a rock thrown by a vandal. Can I get you a cup of tea?’”

Geoff, 77, has spent the past 40 years researching local history and eagerly gives me

a potted bio of the hall, whose earliest sections date back to 1426, when a timber-framed hall was erected, surrounded by a moat. The grandest sections were added in the early 17th century using bricks fired from the estate’s clay pit, at a time when it also boasted its own coalmine, corn mill and game shooting. By the late 1800s, the hall was the town’s largest employer – and entirely self-sufficient, with farms, kitchen gardens and a dairy – but the last Hopwoods left in the early Twenties after the two male heirs, Edward and Robert, were both killed in the First World War, abruptly ending the Hopwood family line.

The hall served as a cotton factory during the Second World War, then a Catholic teacher-training college until the Eighties (one wing still contains a long black-painted bar and discotheque from that iteration, featuring CND signs daubed on the walls and slogans including “Get down and boogie”). By the time DePree arrived, it had been vacant for almost 30 years.

Thanks to the pandemic, restoration work is two years behind schedule. “And we’ve got supply chain issues, like everyone else,” says DePree. “Prices have gone up 30-35 per cent and there are shortages of labour and crew.” How much of his own money has he spent so far? “I would have to ask my accountant,” he says, wincing. “But I haven’t dared.”

Funds, grants and support from institutions including the National Lottery and Historic England have been invaluable, he says, but even more crucial has been the kindness of fellow stately homeowners, a subculture of aristocrats and heirs with the keys to the nation’s castles who have taken DePree under their well-bred wings.

The Earl and Countess of Derby (“Teddy and Cazzy”), the incumbents of Knowsley Hall in Merseyside, have become close friends, not only hosting him for weekend shooting parties but also imparting endless advice on his ambitious restoration. “It is important ➡

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that you stop yourself any time you begin comparing it with a flat or a normal-sized home," he was instructed by the countess. "Think of yourself as the director of a museum. Ultimately, you are delivering a project that will outlast you."

Through the Derbys he has also met the Earl and Countess of Carnarvon, custodians of the real Downton Abbey, Highclere Castle, and the chronicler of it all, Julian Fellowes, as well as Lady Alexandra Tollemache of Helmingham Hall in Suffolk, better known as Xa, a prominent garden designer who now serves on the board of trustees at Hopwood Hall.

Another member of the board is, somewhat improbably, Des Styles, father of Harry, whom DePree's aunt met on a plane and whose background in finance has proved priceless. When the pandemic broke out in 2020 and the Hall was forced to close, Styles invited DePree to stay with him in the early days of lockdown in his south Manchester home, decorated with pictures of his pop-star son.

I'm not sure DePree quite realises the effect he appears to have upon people – landed gentry and locals alike – who all feel impelled to help him. "Maybe it's just that I'm always looking like I'm lost and I need help," he laughs. "I always think everyone's so friendly, but maybe it's more because I'm just stumbling around and they're like, 'Who is this poor sap?' It's probably a case of that."

DePree was born and raised in small-town Michigan, where his father was a US Marine who later went into local politics. As a child, he was embarrassed by his unusual Christian name, bestowed by his history and antiques-loving mother, so went by Tod, keeping "Hopwood" a secret until, in his twenties, when forging a career as a writer/actor/producer in LA, an agent, pointing out its uniqueness, encouraged him to use it.

While his career never made him an A-lister, he enjoyed the creativity of it all – producing, making his own films, performing stand-up. He had a comfortable, well-remunerated life, good friends and a Twenties art deco Spanish-style villa in the Hollywood Hills. "But the death of my father really put things in perspective in terms of a ticking clock," he says. "I'd been so focused on the film industry and valuing myself for my latest movie or project, rather than the bigger picture of what I wanted to accomplish in my life."

"I had come to some type of end in terms of that journey and I needed to do something different," he says. "I just wasn't sure what until I came here." After that first visit, in the autumn of 2013, he slipped back into his LA routine: the gym, sugar-free vanilla ice-blended lattes, pitch meetings at studios. "But I couldn't stop thinking about the hall." He was, he admits, becoming obsessed.



How much money has he spent? 'I would have to ask my accountant. But I haven't dared'

A developer, Oliver Simmons, contacted him about his plan to purchase the hall and turn it into a luxury hotel; such restorations are much more successful if a family member is involved, said Simmons. The project eventually fell through from lack of funding. "I thought that was the end of the road," he says. "I very much thought that in five to ten years the hall would be lost."

Rochdale council, however, had other ideas. DePree had spent 25 years in the entertainment business. Weren't his skills – managing a lot of people and moving parts – precisely what the restoration of the hall required?

So, with impressive tenacity, he applied for a UK visa and, within the space of a few days, sold his LA home, all its contents included, and moved to Middleton. He wondered if he was having a midlife crisis. But also knew he wasn't. "Coming to the area and meeting the locals and knowing that my ancestors would have walked these grounds and been in this building, it just inspired me to want to get involved," he says. "I was searching for something and I suddenly found it, here at Hopwood Hall, and I didn't expect that." He shrugs. "If you can go to a place you've never been and feel like it's home or feel like you belong there... It's hard to explain that, other than it's just a feeling, an innate feeling. Something in me had changed."

Hard hat on, he walks me through some of the rooms that, while dramatically beautiful in their decrepitude, are years away from being suitable for public open days, let alone habitation. I can barely deal with the damp patches in my north London hallway – how does he not feel overwhelmed by the scale of the task? "I can envision things now," he says with a grin. "I can walk into a room and I can see it in a finished state."

I admit to him that, until reading his book, I was shamefully ignorant about the number

of historic houses standing derelict and in the care of local authorities, abandoned by families and heirs unable to afford to keep them. "That was one of the biggest things I learnt as well, when you look at these grand manors that people inherit and see that through the eyes of the responsibility. It's pretty daunting," he says. "Just the upkeep alone is huge. Most of these houses need a staff of 15 gardeners, full-time, so they're all doing weddings and events and opening their gardens to the public just to help with those costs."

The full transition from the council's care to that of DePree will soon be complete, making him Hopwood Hall's official owner. "But all any of us are is a custodian," he says. "These houses have been here for hundreds of years, they're going to outlast all of us, and you're just trying to make sure that you pass it on to the next generation in a way that keeps it up."

And the five-year handover has not merely allowed DePree to prove that the property has a sustainable future. "I've gained so much knowledge of how it all works. Maybe I'm not a skilled craftsman, but I understand how lead windows get put together and that bricks need to breathe," he says, touching the exposed brick wall beside us.

The plan, as it stands, is to open the hall as some sort of creative retreat. "Not a day-to-day hotel, but somewhere people would stay for a few days, maybe two weeks." He is also "open to weddings, filming, a kind of estate-for-hire model". There is talk of a potential TV show. "I'm open to anything that moves the project forward, keeps powering it," he says.

The one thing he does think the hall needs, which he doesn't yet have a plan for, is children. "I really would like to have kids. I'm getting to that point in my life, you know," he says. "I feel content here at Hopwood Hall, and it would be great now to slow down a bit and have my own family." He is single, and has even contemplated using a surrogate. He sighs. "I don't know; it's a big question."

"I can still remember when I first got here and everything felt so foreign, and now it really doesn't," he says. "I still love the US and still visit, but this, it feels like home to me now."

That, he says, is as much down to the overwhelming support of the local community as it is about his ancestral home itself. "Even on my initial visits, people had me over to dinner and lunch and said, 'Bring your laundry along,'" he recalls. "It was that openness and that welcome that made me realise, OK, I could make this leap. I could do this." ■

Downton Shabby: One American's Ultimate DIY Adventure Restoring his Family's English Castle is published by William Morrow, £20. The next open day is on June 18. For tickets, go to eventbrite.co.uk

An aerial photograph of a secluded beach. The water is a vibrant turquoise color, transitioning to a deeper blue further out. The beach is a narrow strip of light-colored sand, bordered by a steep, rocky cliff on the left. The cliff is covered with green trees and shrubs. Numerous colorful beach umbrellas are open along the shoreline, and many people are seen swimming in the water. The overall scene is idyllic and suggests a hidden gem destination.

HOLIDAY LIKE A LOCAL

The insiders' guide to Greece, Portugal, Italy, France
and Spain. Edited by Monique Rivalland

Kavourotyres beach in Sithonia,
tucked away in Halkidiki

WHERE THE GREEKS GET AWAY TO

1 FOLEGANDROS

Generally for Greeks the rule is: don't go to Mykonos, Rhodes or Corfu. When they decamp to an island for summer, they want to tap into childhood memories and nostalgic rituals. Enter Folegandros, which, despite being sandwiched between busy Santorini and Paros, has largely evaded international tourism. Only accessible by boat – yacht or ferry from Santorini or Piraeus – it attracts Athenians who know that their urban kids can run wild and free, just as they did as children themselves. High up on the hillside, a 15-minute walk up a zigzagging white stone path, sits the magnificent church of Panagia, which looks down on the town of Chora as it wakes up at night. Elsewhere the island is extremely rural; it is not unlikely that on your travels you will find someone sunbathing nude next to a donkey on an otherwise deserted beach. Try Ampeli, Serfiotiko or Livadaki for ultimate seclusion. **Stay** The luxury option is Anemi, a set of minimal white cube buildings overlooking the port of Karavostasis (anemihotel.gr). **Eat** Pounta, in Chora, where tables sit in the shade of olive trees.

2 TINOS

With its picture-perfect mountain villages, panoramic hikes and sandy beaches, Tinos exudes a sense of calm during the hectic summer season. The countryside is dotted with ancient windmills – remnants of Venetian rule in the 13th and 14th centuries – and among its flowery squares are tavernas that knock out delicious Greek salads, fava dips and souvlaki. It's one of the best places to experience an authentic Greek Easter: Greeks flock there during the Orthodox Holy Week for candlelit processions and lamb spit roasts. And every August 15, they make a pilgrimage to Tinos to kiss the famous icon of the Virgin Mary at Panagia Evangelistria.

Stay Diles & Rinies, a cluster of stone villas set above Agios Fokas beach (tinovillas.com). **Eat** Tereza restaurant in the sleepy hamlet of Mirsini. It has about six tables, so book ahead.

3 ANDROS

For many Greeks, the question of where to summer is predetermined by family history. They return to their ancestral *horio* (village) and build multigenerational rituals around these places. Andros is one such place. Lush



The church of Panagia overlooks Chora on Folegandros

and mellow, it is much greener than its neighbouring islands because of a profusion of fresh water. There are forests and fields of wildflowers. Andros is popular with creative Athenians thanks to its arts scene (the Goulandris Museum of Contemporary Art has a hot-ticket annual summer exhibition). **Stay** Andros Prive Suites: suites with terraces overlooking the bay of Kypri (androsprivesuites.reserve-online.net). **Eat** O Kossis, a remote spot in the hills overlooking the port village of Gavrio.



Bijou Maison de Meze restaurant in Ano Syros

4 SYROS

Cosmopolitan Syros attracts cultured Greeks. Thanks to its easy access from Athens – 3½ hours on a ferry – the island has off-season appeal. It has an understated grandeur far removed from the usual Greek island cliché. Don't expect standout beaches. It's more about sipping sundowners in stately squares. There's a rugged charm to the capital, Ermoupoli, and an arts scene that's planted this island on the map in recent years (eg the Syros International Film Festival). Another thing that makes this Greek island distinct from the rest is the division of Ermoupoli: one side is Orthodox, the other Catholic (a legacy of Venetian occupation).

Stay Wind Tales hotel in Ano Syros, a town above Ermoupoli. It is stylish and low-key with epic views (£90 a night; windtales.gr). **Eat** For seafood by the sea there are plenty of options, but one of the best is Allou Yialou on Kini beach (try the prawns fired in ouzo). For the quaintest of evening meals head to the tiny Maison de Meze up the hill in Ano Syros.

5 SITHONIA

Halkidiki on the mainland is a three-pronged region in Greece's north. It is on Sithonia, the middle prong, where you will find the Greeks at tavernas eating some of the most sought after *thalassina* (seafood) in the country.

Stay The Danai is a luxury five-star resort in Nikiti, with huge rooms and villas among vivid gardens (danairesort.com). **Eat** Aristos fish taverna in Ormos Panagias, where lamps hang from olive trees and whole grouper is filleted next to your table. ➤

WHERE THE PORTUGUESE GO ON HOLIDAY

The waterfront at Azenhas do Mar, with seawater swimming pool

1 COSTA DA PRATA

The Algarve is not off limits for the Portuguese (apart from the central section, that is, Portimao to Faro). It's just that they know where there are emptier – and, dare we say it, less spoilt – beaches. Take the Costa da Prata, or “Silver Coast”, which runs for 150 miles from north of the capital to Porto, is dotted with surfer beaches and seaside getaways and is also where you'll find a lot of Lisboans in high summer. The vibe is laid-back, casual and welcoming. Highlights include Obidos, Portugal's prettiest walled town, and its sheltered lagoon, which has Foz do Arelho – a relaxed village with stunning clifftop boardwalks – on the other side of it. Further north, surfy Nazare is famous for its record-breaking, ten-storey high waves. If it's peace and quiet you're after, the most uncrowded beaches are Pedrogao and Osso da Baleia, south of Figueira da Foz. For wild,

untamed beauty? Try those around Tocha.

Stay Hippy-chic Areias do Seixo hotel, which lies between the pine groves and sand dunes near Santa Cruz. As stylish as it is eco-conscious (areiasdoseixo.com).

Eat On the waterfront in Azenhas do Mar, at a restaurant of the same name, for top-notch fish and seafood. In front of its terrace is a seawater swimming pool, which fills up at high tide as the waves break over the outer wall.

2 AVEIRO

Compact and colourful, Aveiro is a quirky seaside resort an hour south of Porto. Situated on a lagoon five miles inland from the Costa da Prata, the city has a network of canals and bridges that mean it's dubbed “the Venice of Portugal”. That's a bit of a stretch, but they do have gondolas, or *moliceiros*, which used to gather seaweed and now ferry around tourists. There's a jewel of an old town, with ornate art nouveau and beautiful azulejo-tiled buildings

to ogle, and a thriving street-art scene. The beach is 30 minutes away at Costa Nova, whose candy-striped houses are as summery as a stick of rock.

Stay Desertas Beach and Sport, at Costa Nova – four cool wooden pods amid the pines on a sand spit. A word of advice: when you get to the Atlantic side of the spit from Desertas, turn left not right, or you'll end up on the nudist beach (desertas-beachandsport.com).

Eat O Bairro, opposite Aveiro's fish market. Seafood is a speciality (obvs) but so is risotto – the catch of the day is served on sundried tomato and seaweed risotto, and sliced steak on a mushroom one.

3 SAGRES

Set on top of sheer red sandstone cliffs at Europe's most southwesterly point, Sagres has an elemental beauty and easygoing atmosphere that keep visitors returning time and again. The town sits where the Algarve



Picnic at Sao Lourenco do Barrocal, Monsaraz

meets the magnificent Costa Vicentina, where the towering cliffs give way to glorious long beaches. The waves thunder in from the Atlantic round here, so the crowd is young and surfy. Yes, daytrippers roll up in buses to look at the (rebuilt) fort from which Henry the Navigator plotted Portugal's overseas expansion in the 15th century and to visit Cape St Vincent just down the road. But by sunset it's just a jeans and Havaianas crowd, drinking beer and carb-loading before the next day's wipeouts. Even if you don't surf, it's a damn enticing way to pass an evening.

Stay Memmo Baleeira was founded by a surfer who used to come to Sagres for childhood holidays. Set on a cliff above the harbour, it feels quite Scandi, with supercomfy beds, a spa and invigorating sea air (memmohotels.com).

Eat It may be a launderette cum café/bar, but the Laundry Lounge is also the hippest place in town. Big portions of pan-Pacific food with a side order of washing machine on full spin.

4 MELIDES

For the past few years, all the fashionable buzz has been about Comporta, a chic little village an hour and a half south of Lisbon. The trouble is it's all become a bit... sceney. And expensive. If you prefer your Portugal still to have a few Portuguese people in it, head half an hour further south to Melides, an artists' enclave with a more down-to-earth crowd (and prices). The place does admittedly have its esoteric/exclusive side – Melides Art is an extraordinary art park cum (posh) holiday village in 270 hectares of pine groves, and Christian Louboutin, Philippe Starck and



Costa Nova, near Aveiro

Anselm Kiefer have homes locally – but you get the same beautiful, 40-mile long beach as Comporta (just a different bit of it), cool shops and rather less blah. At least for the moment: new villas are springing up and Christian Louboutin is currently building a five-star hotel in the village. Best get there before the hordes descend.



The walled town of Obidos, Costa da Prata

Stay Montum Farm Living has stylish, well thought out cabins dotted around a cork farm. Settle in for the night and look at the stars. Heavenly (montumfarmliving.pt).

Eat Sorry, Melides, but you can't compete with Cavalarica, a brilliant restaurant in a converted stable in Comporta. Modern, more-ish Portuguese food that's big on local sourcing.

5 MONSARAZ

With its endless golden wheat fields, vineyards and rolling hills, the Alentejo is a natural charmer, with pockets that are still moderately undiscovered. But in summer the heat can get furnace-like. There are two solutions: stay on the coast or by Alqueva, Europe's largest artificial lake, a description that does nothing to convey the sheer gobsmacking beauty of the place. You can get a bird's eye view from Monsaraz, a hilltop medieval village on one edge of it, that gives you an unbeatable panorama of the lake and Spain beyond it. Monsaraz is a stunner too, with a ruined castle, interesting little shops, whitewashed houses and clouds of bougainvillea cascading down walls. When the sun gets too intense, just head down the hill to the Blue Flag lakeside beach for a cooling dip.

Stay Sao Lourenco do Barrocal, a consummate but casual five-star hotel in a lovingly restored farm estate. Think Farrow & Ball colours, charming staff and acres of space (barrocal.pt).

Eat There are more sophisticated restaurants in Monsaraz, but it's hard to beat the quality of the local cheese, black pig ham and tortilla at the tiny O Gaspacho café, on the main street. And, yes, they do gazpacho too. ➤



WHERE THE ITALIANS GO ON HOLIDAY

1 GIGLIO, TUSCANY

Giglio hit the headlines when the cruise ship Costa Concordia crashed here ten years ago, but it has been a low-key and unpretentious destination for Italian holidaymakers for decades. Roman professionals come here to unwind, as it's only an hour's ferry from Porto Santo Stefano on the Tuscan coast, which itself is only an hour and a half from Rome Fiumicino airport. The La Guardia hotel on the port served as the salvage operation's HQ after the accident. The hotel – tired at the time – has now changed hands, been

redesigned and is now possibly the best place to stay on the island. It's not prohibitively expensive either. Giglio has a very natural beauty – human life is sparse and the landscape is extremely green, covered in pine, eucalyptus and fig (a must-try is the local fig bread, *panficato*). The best beaches are Spiaggia delle Caldane and Cannelle, both walkable from the port.

Stay If not at La Guardia then at Pardini's Hermitage, a cliffside hotel only reachable by boat (hermit.it).

Eat Da Maria, in the mountain town of Castello. Classic Italian food in a restaurant

that hasn't changed for decades, with sunset views over the archipelago.

2 THE MAREMMA COAST

The Maremma is a coastal region straddling southern Tuscany and northern Lazio and has both great beaches and perfectly preserved ancient villages to explore. One of the most prized is the medieval town of Capalbio, dominated by a fortress around which weave narrow alleyways with stone arches. It is a popular spot for an evening stroll among the Renaissance frescoes and a sundowner in a small cobbled piazza. From there, it's a



Pollara beach on Salina is lined with stone fishermen's houses

20-minute drive to a favourite beach spot for locals, Ultima Spiaggia ("last beach", as it touches the border with Lazio). This is a no-frills sun-worshippers' institution with simple seafood and sunloungers on offer. A little further north, in the Maremma Regional Park, you can hike to pristine coves secluded by rosemary bushes and pine groves.

Stay L'Andana is a lovely hotel housed in the former hunting lodge of Leopold II, Duke of Tuscany. A 15-minute drive from the city of Grosseto and from the nearest beach, its driveway is lined by cypress trees and it has lush gardens with olive groves (andana.it).

Eat La Dogana Capalbio, a chic spot for lunch and cocktails on the beach near Capalbio.

3 SALINA, SICILY

Head to the Aeolian island of Salina in June, before the hordes of Italians descend in July and August. It's not easy to get to – the ferry from Palermo is 3½ hours, from Milazzo in Sicily it's 1½ hours, from Naples more than 6 hours – but it's still so popular that you have to book a room months in advance. The island is volcanic and has three coastal towns: Santa Marina, Rinella and Malfa, all of them with simple, pastel-coloured houses climbing up the hillside and battered fishing boats bobbing in the bay. Santa Marina is the main port and from here you can rent a scooter and take a trip to Punta Lingua, where you will find a lighthouse on a brackish lake and a piazza where you can grab a cheap lunch of *pane cunzato*, a typical Sicilian *povera* (poor) dish of bread topped with fresh ingredients, in particular capers from the island. On the other side of Salina is Pollara beach where you find the *balate*, stone fishermen's houses carved into the cliff-face and accessible by a steep staircase cut into the rock. This is the spot to watch the sun set over the Aeolian islands with a glass of local Malvasia sweet wine.

Stay Principe di Salina is a boutique hotel near Malfa much loved by Italians. It is peak Med with all-white walls and palms, cacti and olive trees around the pool (principedisalina.it).

Eat Porto Bello or Didyme in Santa Marina: both do top-notch seafood with a view.

4 PANAREA

Cool, wealthy Italian families go to Panarea in August. The smallest of the Aeolian islands, it's not ostentatious but is a bit sexier and glossier than its sister isles. Dolce & Gabbana love it, the Bulgari family have a home here and it has also attracted international A-listers – Beyoncé and Jay Z, Jeff Bezos and Kate Moss have holidayed on the isle. Though they are likely to have helicoptered in rather than taken the ferry from Milazzo. But all this is not to say that Panarea has lost its local charm, because it hasn't. You cannot help but be enchanted by the sheer Mediterranean-ness of the bougainvillea-laced walls and cornflower-blue doors of the tiny but labyrinthine port town of San Pietro.

When it comes to beaches, you can hire a scooter or a golf cart (there are no cars on the island) and head to the one or two that have roads leading to them (Cala Zimmari and Spiaggia della Calcara), but the best way to do it is *come gli Italiani*: hire a boat and zip around the perimeter visiting the coves, stopping to eat *insalata caprese* on the deck.

Stay Hotel Raya is the place to be on Panarea. It has simple, sophisticated rooms but the main draw is the after-dinner social scene. At night



The medieval town of Capalbio on the Maremma coast

one of its many large terraces looking out to sea transforms into an open-air dancefloor full of sexy sun-kissed people (hotelraya.it).

Eat There is not an abundance of restaurants on Panarea. Most people eat at their hotel or in their villa. But for a smart dinner out, Hycesia in San Pietro is a good choice.

5 SANTA MARIA DI LEUCA, PUGLIA

Leuca, as the locals call it, lies at the tip of Italy's "stiletto heel" – the Salento peninsula – and as such is lesser-reached by tourists. The Italians, though, make the journey to this point where the Ionian and Adriatic seas meet for the enchanting grottos and the blue-green waters, the coves full of colourful parasols and the laid-back lidos. A standout beach is Il Ciolo, a sliver of an inlet in the Adriatic with swimming caves and an epic aqueduct crossing the water above. From here there is a great and very doable one-hour hike across the limestone headlands called the Sentiero delle Cipolliane. The beaches are small so if you're looking for stretches of sand with lower cliffs, the Ionian side is your best bet: try Felloniche and Posto Vecchio. The region is full of Greco-Roman ruins too.

Stay This area doesn't have fancy hotels, but L'Approdo is attractive and has a pool with views of Leuca's harbour (hotelapprodo.com).

Eat Beachfront Lido Azzurro is practically a Pugliese institution. It was one of the first simple seaside seafood joints in Salento. ➤

Chiller queen



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WHERE THE FRENCH GO ON HOLIDAY

1 SAINT-JEAN-DE-LUZ, BASQUE COUNTRY

Sandwiched between two blockbuster Basque destinations – Biarritz in France and San Sebastian in Spain – Saint-Jean-de-Luz has flown under the radar relative to its A-list neighbours. A small fishing town on the Bay of Biscay, about 20 minutes' drive from Biarritz, it has a postcard-perfect crescent of colourful wooden-framed houses along the seafront, as well as great sandy beaches. Paddle-boarders, cyclists, hikers and surfers love it, but fans also come for the Basque cuisine and the thalassotherapy from the mineral-rich seawater pools (*luz* is not Spanish for “light” but Basque for “swamp”). For magnificent views over the Atlantic and the Pyrenees, take the 1900s cog train up to the summit of La Rhune.

Stay Grand Hotel Thalasso and Spa is an impressive pink villa on the seaside (luzgrandhotel.fr).

Eat Or rather drink at L'Atelier Egiategia, a winery in a hut overlooking Ciboure beach. Wine is aged in barrels under the sea.

2 BONIFACIO, CORSICA

This cliff-edge town in southern Corsica attracts a smart Parisian crowd dressed in chic resort gear. Its colourful buildings sitting on the bluff's edge are best viewed from a yacht in the Tyrrhenian Sea, the mode of transport for the Bonifacio set. In the old town, streets are lined with brasseries and boutiques. The marine cemetery Campu Santu is a peaceful spot with panoramic views of the Med and Sardinia in the distance. It's something of an initiation ceremony to descend (and then ascend) the King of Aragon's Stairway to the sea – 187 ancient steps carved into the cliff face.

Stay If not on a yacht, then at the Hotel Cala di Greco, with its infinity pool overlooking the harbour (hotel-caladigreco.com).

Eat Wild boar stew is the local delicacy and it is best sampled at Kissing Pigs, an authentic Corsican restaurant in the marina.

3 LES CÉVENNES, OCCITANIE

East of Avignon lies one of the most famous destinations in France: the Provençal hills. Just west of the city you'll find a lesser-known beauty: the magnificent peaks and valleys of Les Cévennes and the surrounding Ardèche and Tarn gorges. This is where French families escape to in the summer. Outdoor pursuits are the main event. Kayaking along



Houses press up to the cliff edge at Bonifacio on Corsica

the still (and very safe) waters at the depths of the canyons is one of the most popular activities. Roll through the hills in a rental car between picturesque hamlets, farmhouses, vineyards and rustic restaurants.

Stay La Maison Papillons, Montclus. A small, chic guesthouse on the eastern border of Les Cévennes, a 20-minute drive from the Ardèche gorge (lamaisonpapillons.fr).

Eat Carabasse in Beaulieu and Le Mouton Noir in Issirac.



Saint-Jean-de-Luz

4 CAP FERRAT, AQUITAINE

Not Cap Ferrat, the glitzy celeb hangout on the Côte d'Azur, but a narrow peninsula on the Aquitaine coast, covered in pine trees and sand dunes and frequented in the summer months by beach-lovers from Bordeaux. It's sort of like Cape Cod is to Bostonites: people come here to surf, swim, fish and drink wine at the many bayside oyster shacks. Across the Bay of Arcachon you can see the Dune du Pilat, the tallest sand dune in Europe. Most people stay in one of the weathered wooden houses or old fishermen's cottages, but there are hotels too.

Stay La Maison du Bassin, an old timber house with stylish furniture and a nautical feel (lamaisondubassinacpferret.com).

Eat Chai Bertrand, a no-frills beach shack with oysters, prawns, whelks and white wine.

5 ÎLE-DE-BRHÉAT, BRITTANY

A mile off the coast of Brittany, Bréhat is not really an island but an archipelago of 86 islets and reefs that brings to mind the Seychelles rather than the English Channel. It has a fairytale landscape of pink granite rock and verdant hills and is a destination for well-heeled French visitors looking to cut themselves off from the stresses of modern life. Existence here is slow and peaceful, and days are steered by the tides. This is the sort of place where you will go for a walk through fields of wildflowers and come across ancient water mills and tiny chapels.

Stay Accommodation is basic, which is all part of the experience, but you can also stay on the mainland and take the seven-minute ferry across from L'Arcouest. In both cases, renting a *gîte* is the best option.

Eat Go for moules-frites at La Cabounette. ➔

WHERE THE SPANISH GO ON HOLIDAY

1 MALLORCA

Whisper it: it's not just Brits who go on holiday to Mallorca. It's a favourite among Spanish second-homers and families who love heading to Deia, a pretty hillside village with the famous bayside restaurant from *The Night Manager* – Ca's Patro March. It's still cool even though everyone knows about it (you need to book a month in advance during August). Also popular among those in the know is Es Trenc, with its blue waters and white sands and excellent restaurant of the same name. This is the spot to try seafood paella on the beachfront. Others stay in Puerto Pollensa, a seaside town with a calmer-than-Palma vibe. Stay at Illa D'Or hotel on the bay (hotelillador.com) and head for dinner at Na Ruixa, for langoustines and classic Balearic charm.

Stay Hotel Bendinat, a boutique hotel on the outskirts of Palma. It has luscious gardens and pine-tree shaded terraces looking out to sea (hotelbendinat.es).

Eat Son Tomas in Banyalbufar, a family-run restaurant in the mountains. Ask for a table on the terrace and try the local wine.

2 FORMENTERA

It may be only 30 minutes south of Ibiza by ferry, but the island of Formentera bears little resemblance to its bigger, brasher neighbour. It's largely undeveloped, with more than 70 per cent of the land protected. There are barely any cars and the best way to get around is by hiring a bike and exploring the 32 "green routes" that zigzag across the island. The bay of Es Calo de Sant Agustí is a traditional, unspoilt harbour with wooden boathouses and a great restaurant called Es Calo.

Stay Tiny and stylish, Casa Pacha on the beachfront at Es Arenals has raw plastered walls, wooden furniture and natural linens (casapacha.com).

Eat Es Codol Foradat is a little further west up the coast from Es Arenals. Try the fried shrimps and Galician razor clams.

3 COSTA BRAVA

When Barcelona boils over, Catalonians head to the Costa Brava for its spectacular coastlines and safe, sandy beaches. The gorgeous town of Cadaques is famous for its whitewashed houses, museums and art galleries – Salvador Dalí had a house here – but it's the rocky stretch of coast that runs from the fishing town of Palamos to Girona that is Catalonia's best-kept secret. The towns of Palamos and Begur have become culinary



Sa Tuna bay near Begur on the Costa Brava

destinations, and the bay of Sa Tuna is so picture perfect the locals are reluctant to share it. During the summer it's best to ditch the car – the winding roads are often blocked with traffic – and stay in a coastal town with everything you need in walking distance.

Stay Hotel Villa Gala in Cadaques. It's right by Port Alguer (hotelvillagala.com).

Eat The fish at Miramar in Llanca, an award-winning restaurant run by the Michelin-starred chef Paco Pérez.



The hillside village of Deia on Mallorca

4 SAN SEBASTIAN

No secrets here: people come to San Sebastian to eat, and usually just for a long weekend. The most popular food is pintxo – bite-size snacks typically served on bread or cocktail sticks, costing €2-€5 each. A 30-minute drive west along the coast is the lesser-known town of Getaria, where you'll find the Michelin-starred Elkano. The grilled fish is so good, the place was ranked No 16 in the World's 50 Best Restaurants last year.

Stay The grand, classical Hotel de Londres y de Inglaterra in Concha bay (hlondres.com).

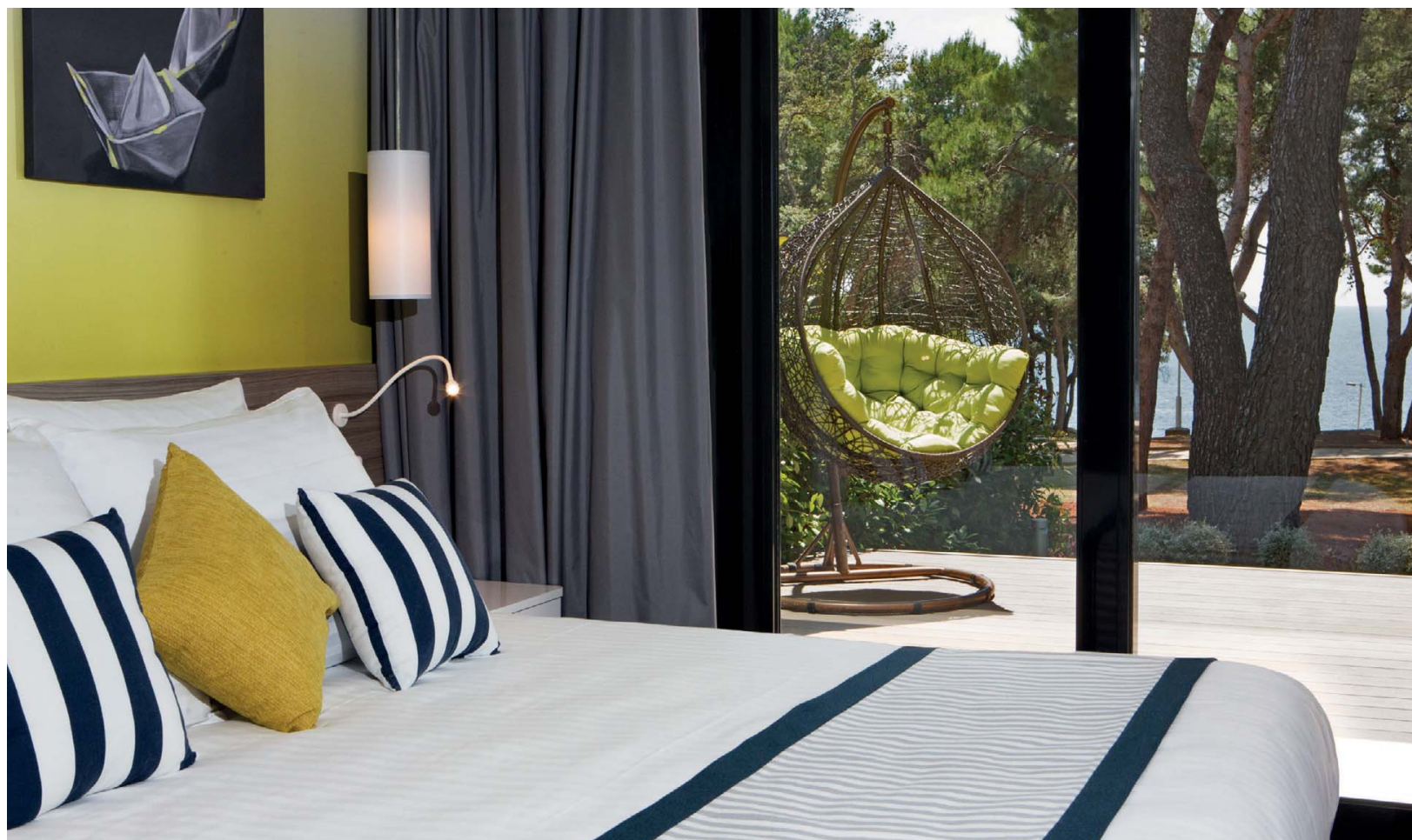
Eat Just out of town, try the tasting menu at Zuberoa, set in a 600-year-old farmhouse.

5 CADIZ PROVINCE

This region on the southwest Atlantic coast is great for culture, Moorish history, flamenco music and, of course, food. The town of Sanlúcar de Barrameda is Spain's city of gastronomy for 2022. Locals head to a restaurant called Casa Bigote for the best prawns in the area. Aponiente, in neighbouring Puerto de Santa María, is the best restaurant you've never heard of. It has three Michelin stars for its innovative seafood dishes using plankton, cod tongue and squid liver. Further south along the coast are the spectacular surfing beaches of Novo Sancti Petri, or for seclusion head for Calos de Seca. **Stay** Hospederia Duques de Medina Sidonia, a 15th-century palace in Sanlúcar de Barrameda (ruralduquesmedinasidonia.com).

Eat The tuna restaurant El Campero, in Barbate, is unmissable. ■

With thanks to Amanda Dardanis, John Carlin, Sophie Debaere, Amanda Linfoot, Amber Guinness and Matthew Bell



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Eating in Nadiya Hussain

These nutty, zesty apricot buns are foolproof – perfect for new bakers

This is my go-to bun recipe and is a really good place to start if you are new to baking and want a reliable, easy method that produces foolproof results every time. You can mix up

the flavours any way you like, either changing the dough or the filling, but I've settled on apricots here because they are just coming into season and for me their sweet juiciness is like a first taste of summer. Alternatively, you can use dried.

Adding lemon zest to the dough perfectly balances the sweetness of the vanilla-flavoured apricots, and the pecans add both crunch and nuttiness. This is perfect for the coming months, whether for picnics, garden parties or even packed lunches.

APRICOT PECAN BUNS

Makes 12

For the buns

- 450g strong bread flour, plus extra for dusting
- 50g unsalted butter, chopped into cubes, softened
- 14g fast-action yeast
- 50g caster sugar
- 1 tsp fine sea salt
- 1 lemon, zest only
- 1 medium egg, beaten
- 150ml warm milk

For the filling

- 200g apricots, halved, stoned and roughly chopped
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 25g unsalted butter, softened
- 25g caster sugar
- 100g pecans, finely chopped, plus 12 whole for the tops



Apricots are coming into season. For me, their sweet juiciness is like a first taste of summer

For the glaze

- 150g apricot jam

1. Pop the strong bread flour into a bowl along with the soft butter cubes. Rub together using your fingertips until all the butter has been rubbed in.
2. Add the yeast and the caster sugar to one side of the bowl

and the salt to the other. Sprinkle in the lemon zest and mix everything through.

3. Make a well in the centre, add the egg and warm milk and, using your hands, bring the dough together. Tip out onto a floured surface and knead the dough for ten minutes, until it is smooth, shiny and elastic.

4. Place it in a bowl, cover with clingfilm and leave to prove in a warm spot until doubled in size, about 1½ to 2 hours.

5. Meanwhile, make the filling. If using dried apricots, add them to a bowl with boiling water for ten minutes. Take out, drain, and squeeze until as much of the moisture as possible has been removed.

6. Add them (or the chopped fresh apricots) to a food processor with the vanilla extract, butter and sugar, and blitz till you have an even mixture. Set aside.

7. Line and grease two large baking trays. Dust the worktop with flour, take the dough out and roll out to a 25cm x 45cm rectangle.

8. With the longest side closest to you, spread all the filling right to the edge. Sprinkle over the chopped pecans evenly. Roll from the long side and then cut into 12 equal swirls.

9. Pop six on each tray with lots of room to grow. Using the palm of your hands, squash them down so they are flat and even. Cover with greased clingfilm and leave to prove until doubled in size.

10. Preheat the oven to 160C (180C non-fan). Take the clingfilm off the buns. Add a pecan to the centre of each and bake for 20 minutes, or until golden and puffed. Remove and leave on the baking tray to cool.

11. Make the glaze by mixing the apricot jam and 2 tbsp hot water until you have a runny glaze. Brush all over the hot buns and leave to cool for 20 minutes before eating. ■

You can find all of Nadiya Hussain's recipes for *The Times* at thetimes.co.uk





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Eating out

Giles Coren



TOM JACKSON



‘I don’t know why my gout is playing up. It can’t be the beer, wine and cocktails, so it must be all the oily fish’

Detox Kitchen

Not that it’s your job to listen to my health woes (or mine to tell you them), but I’m having another gout attack. I know, I know, the 18th century rang and it wants its diagnosis back. Yes, yes, I’ll get myself checked out for scrofula, smallpox, leprosy, diphtheria, the falling sickness and assorted other hilarious old-fashioned ailments just as soon as I stop laughing at your comedic diminution of this really quite painful affliction on the basis that it sounds like something out of *Blackadder*.

Although it’s actually not too painful this morning. Just a mild throbbing in the big toe joint of my left foot, which is red and slightly glowing if I take my sock off (and probably if I don’t, but you can take that one up with Bishop Berkeley), but then if I try to squeeze it into a leather shoe, or accidentally stub it on a door or something, is suddenly INCREDIBLY PAINFUL. So I try not to.

I know some people get attacks so bad that it’s insupportable to lay even a cotton sheet over the afflicted area, but I usually get away with a few days of mild limping medicated with large quantities of ibuprofen, many litres of water to dilute the uric acid in my blood (of which I have too much, genetically) and dissuade it from crystallising in my joints, and also as much cherry juice as I can ➔

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Eating out Giles Coren

swallow because that does, weirdly, seem to help. Those old wives knew a thing or two, although I'd never admit it to their wrinkly, haggard faces.

I never know what sets it off, because what the Harley Street quack who first diagnosed this told me to avoid was "purines", which I recall his saying were mostly found in sherry, port and scallops (I know, I know, the 18th century rang...) and I thought I was probably pretty safe there, because I have a glass of port only once a year, at Christmas, then retch and throw the bottle away, sherry is a bit 2015 for me, and scallops I only like raw, which means every couple of months, at best, if I find myself at a decent sushi bar and they have some fresh in that day.

There are some more general guidelines about minimising alcohol consumption, with specific warnings on spirits (which I touch rarely) and beer (in which I do occasionally dabble), and then prawns, oily fish, offal, red meat... descending into one of those NEVER EAT ANYTHING EVER lists that are almost certainly sponsored by the Kale Marketing Board. So I'm wondering this Monday morning (and it always seems to be on a Monday morning that I suffer) what might have set me off this time.

Looking back to last week: Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday were pretty blameless. Just a couple of pints of Camden Hells at my son's cricket club on Monday evening, then on Tuesday the fish stew at J Sheekey (which has gone right off) with half a bottle of white, and then supper at the new Din Tai Fung in Selfridges for some dim sum (prawns and scallops may have featured) and a couple of beers. Wednesday was a cocktail at Claridge's followed by two Aperol spritzes at a party at the Italian embassy and then home for a restorative lamb curry with Esther and not even a whole bottle of claret.

It was only on Thursday that I let my hair down a little over lunch at my new favourite restaurant, Cin Cin, a laidback Fitzrovia Italian where I had a cold beer and then a carafe of white and a carafe of red with excellent *carciofi alla giudia*, stuffed courgette flowers, salumi and a terrific lobster fettuccine with... Oh, wait, lobster, there you go – that could have been it. And then supper with friends in Notting Hill with two negronis and then just a few bottles of wine, no more than two. But possibly there were scallops in the canapés that I didn't know about?

Friday supper was a bit looser, admittedly: poker with a chef friend who threw a lovely spread for 18 of us that started with a healthy nettle pasta and some charcuterie, then a side of 17-year-old Shetland beef, cooked perfectly over live coals, with the

most marvellously yellow fat and the deepest flavour. Maybe that was the villain. Because I drank nothing but cocktails all night. Except obviously a couple of large glasses of rioja with the beef. Maybe three.

Saturday I spent at Lord's, watching Middlesex thrash Durham in the County Championship, so consumed nothing more dangerous than an egg sandwich stuffed with salt and vinegar crisps (my son's recipe) and five pints of Hobgoblin. And then in the evening I took everyone back to mine for a barbecue, where I went the healthy route of hot-smoking a side of salmon over wood, which I now recall is very bad for gout, what with the "oily fish" thing. So it was probably that which did for my toe joint. Although you'd have thought the half-case of

**'I don't hold with
"detoxing", a notion
invented by charlatans.
But I like everything
else about this place'**

Whispering Angel we drank would have flushed that through safely enough.

Sunday was Pizza Express with the kids. I had a La Reine and just a couple of Peronis. Although they do a larger bottle now, 660ml, so it was those I had a pair of. And then for dinner I made spaghetti alla bottarga: half a lobe of mullet roe, grated with a little garlic and whisked into extra virgin olive oil with a splash of the pasta water, toss the spaghetti through that and serve a little chopped parsley from the garden and the remains of the Whispering Angel. Moderacy itself.

But this morning I'm in hell. Toe glowing like an aeroplane warning light on the Shard. After such a blameless week. Could bottarga count as "oily fish", perhaps? Either way, there is only one option for lunch today: Detox Kitchen.

It's not the sort of place you'd expect me to love, being a boozeless, canteen-style, wheat-free, dairy-free, predominantly plant-based, queue up, salad in a box and green juice place with cardboard bowls and compostable cutlery that began as a diet-food delivery service. But I really do. It's bang opposite my office and I go about once a week, sometimes even when I'm not having a gout attack.

They have a load of salad combinations on the wall called things like "Chasing Rainbows" and "Cool as a Cucumber" that I couldn't bring myself to say out loud to the servers who compile them fresh in front of you, even if they were exactly the combos that I wanted, which they nearly were, but not quite.

So I prefer to do it all on the fly, choosing two of the "bases" (lettuce, kale, rice noodles, brown rice, quinoa), then one of five proteins (chicken, prawns, salmon, tofu, mushroom), and four "ingredients" from a selection that includes edamame beans, peas, chickpeas, black beans, roasted cauliflower, sweetcorn, cucumber, halved cherry tomato, carrot, red cabbage, sweet potato... All of them fresh, nothing frozen, all British and all delicious. And then usually a quartered boiled egg and some avocado from the "toppings" list (the section headings are a bit erratic).

Today I went for quinoa and kale then tofu, edamame, sweetcorn, tomato, sweet potato, egg, avocado, oh, and chopped nuts, roasted seeds and dry fried onions from the "crunch" list, with two dressings (there are about eight), and it was delicious, as it always is. So many textures and colours and veg of such quality that it never gets boring, and they give you so much that it can be a struggle to finish sometimes, which is the fibre doing its job, as it does in a proper diet, of telling your stomach it is full, while waiting for the protein to be absorbed, whereas a processed diet is all about giving you no fibre at all, to persuade your body that you're not full and need more and more of this junk, which is why you're fat and getting fatter (that's a "you" plural, by the way, not a "you" singular, and is thus undeniable).

I don't really like the name of the place because I don't hold with the notion of "detoxing" – I think it is a chimera invented by charlatan "nutritionists" to overcharge for special kinds of water. But I like everything else about it. Not least the fact that meals come in around £8 or £9 at most (jugs of cucumber water are available free at a table on the side) to sit in a nice, light room full of (gorgeous) young people, getting full to the eyeballs with stuff that, if it won't actively make you live longer, definitely won't kill you as quickly as most other restaurants. In fact, my toe is feeling better already, just thinking about it. ■

Detox Kitchen

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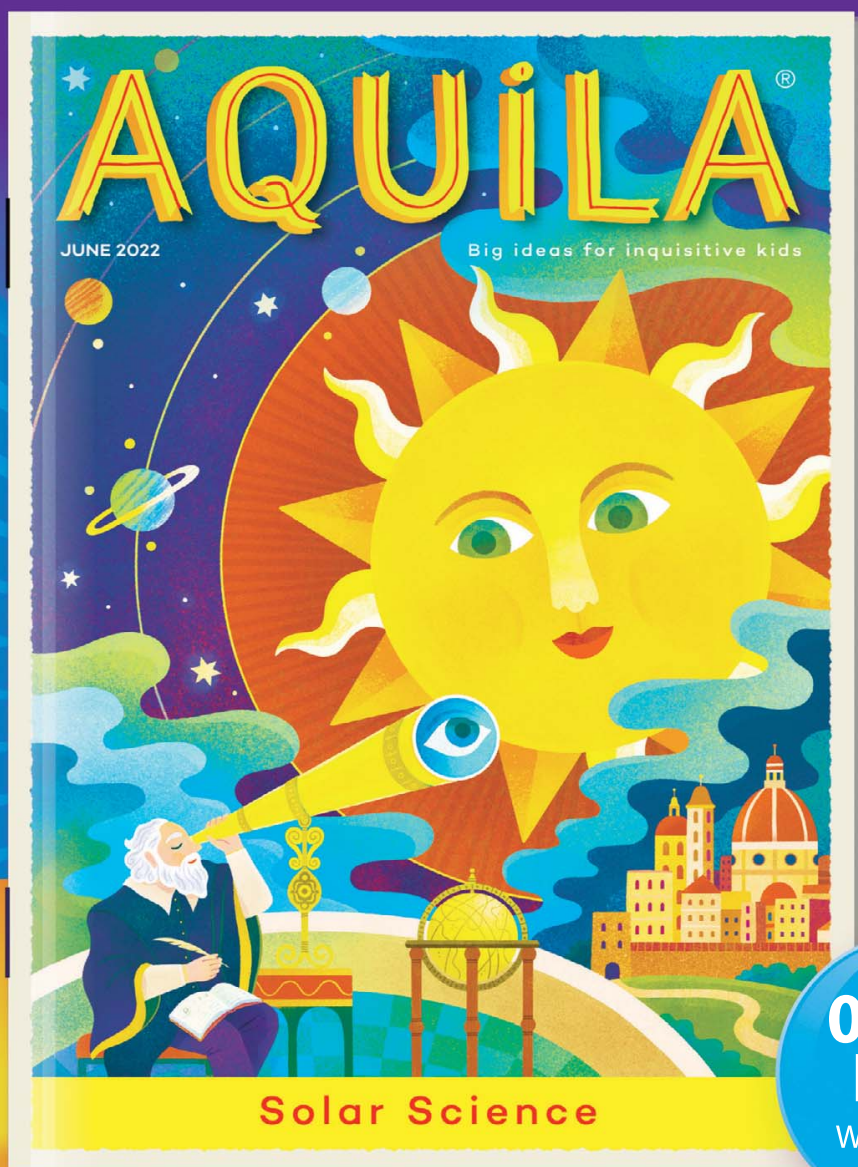
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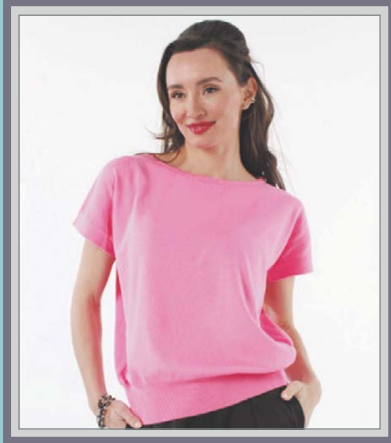
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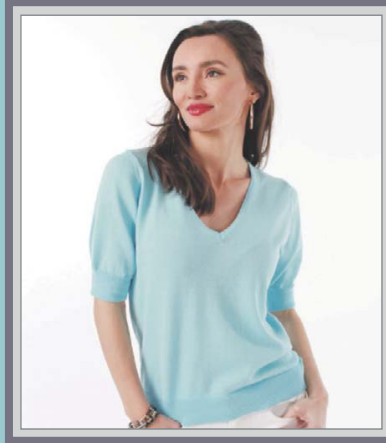
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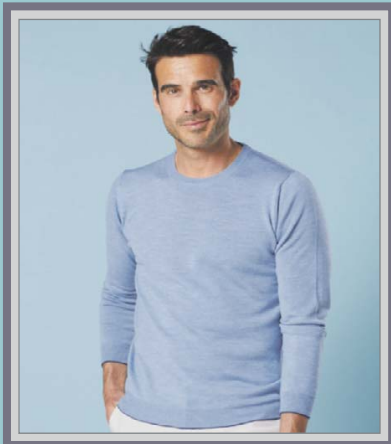
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‘My wife thinks domestic matters should be decided jointly. She is yet to fully appreciate the depth of my indifference’



TOM JACKSON

My kids sometimes ask me what career

I would have chosen if I hadn't chosen this one. I didn't really choose it, I reply; I just sort of started doing it and hoped I wouldn't get found out. My options were restricted, I tell them, on account of not being much good at anything else. Some might argue, I tend to add (fishing for a compliment that fails to arrive), that I'm not much good at this either.

Hah, hah, they say. Silence. Tumbleweed.

I wouldn't have minded a stab at acting, politics or academia. Of course, the best options, aged 18, are sport or music. But I was only an average athlete and any semblance of musical talent has given our entire family a wide berth.

Thinking it through, I reckon I might have been a scaffolder. As a younger man, I liked climbing. I appreciate a good roofscape. I enjoy being outdoors. In my maturity, as a potential gaffer, whenever we've had cause to hire a scaffold, I've always been impressed by the cost incurred. And thus the profits available were I on the other side of the equation.

No doubt there are expenses involved (insurance, transportation, storage) but, dammit, it's only a few planks of wood, lengths of piping and clamps. The completed edifice isn't that complicated. Nor is it time-consuming to erect or dismantle. And yet you pay thousands of pounds to hire this simple structure. If I'd started young and expanded cautiously, avoiding any catastrophic claims for industrial accidents, negligence or voyeurism, I could be enjoying a well-heeled retirement by now. No doubt my more scaffold-aware contemporaries are doing precisely that.

This is a long-winded way of saying we're having the front of our house painted. This maintenance work is well overdue, in two senses. First, the house faces west, and thus falls prey to the worst excesses of the prevailing weather. Peeling, flaking, blistering, even rotting, these depredations have all long been identified and bemoaned by my wife. Second, we've lived here 27 years. The house has always been white. Time for a change, says Nicola.

I'm all for change. In theory. In practice, I struggle to know what Nicola is talking about when she tries to discuss the way forward. We're in Farrow & Ball territory, obvs, and I'm sorry, but I've never actually seen either a mole or an elephant exhaling. And even if I had, I'd be pushed to describe the precise shade, if any, of their outgoing breath.

Many years ago, 15 or 20, we were about to have our kitchen redecorated. Nicola

conscientiously sought my opinion. Whatever I may have implied in this column, my wife's instincts are basically democratic. She thinks these matters should be decided jointly. Good for her. Except Nicola is yet to fully appreciate the depth of my indifference.

Back in the day, she tried to involve me by way of colour charts and sample pots. Now she employs messages on the family WhatsApp, seeking comment on subtly varying shades culled from paint websites. Technological advance has made little difference: I rarely have an opinion to offer and I often cannot distinguish between the alternatives.

I hate to make a gender-related generalisation but, on WhatsApp, while our daughter, Rachel, will engage enthusiastically in discussing the minutest nuances, I tend to stick with, "I agree with everything." Our son, Sam, ignores the thread entirely.

The process is complicated because our house (late Georgian, doncha know) boasts if not the original – because that would be downright peculiar after close on two centuries of wear and tear – then certainly the traditional sash windows. Such windows comprise many and varied moving parts and surfaces. Some of which, Nicola tells me, convention suggests should be painted in a certain way, while other parts and surfaces should not. I say, "How fascinating. You decide."

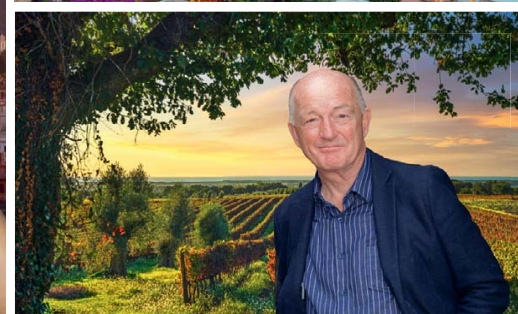
Going back to the kitchen makeover, Nicola would spend ages on the phone to her pals seeking their views. As an experiment, I consulted five male friends on the same subject. Two assumed I was joking. One became borderline aggressive. One tried to help, his advice fatally undermined when he let slip he didn't know what colour he'd painted his own kitchen mere months previously.

The fifth, my pal Andy, demonstrating a photographic recall of the layout, dimensions and decor of our culinary space way superior to my own (and I was standing looking at it while he was in Bristol), was full of ideas. I salute and curse him now as I did then.

"Let's look at it from across the road," Nicola keeps saying, now that the process (inshallah!) is almost complete. Let's examine the transition, from this, that and the other angle. I squint dutifully and do my best to summon up a fresh assessment that might sound vaguely plausible.

It ain't happening, I'm afraid. ■

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